



Peter Cartwright 1785-1872

Peter Cartwright was an American Methodist revivalist in the Midwest, as well as twice an elected legislator in Illinois. Cartwright, a Methodist missionary, helped start the Second Great Awakening, personally baptizing twelve thousand converts. Opposed to slavery, Cartwright moved from Kentucky to Illinois, and was elected to the lower house of the Illinois General assembly in 1828 and 1832. In 1846 Abraham Lincoln defeated Cartwright for a seat in the United States Congress. As a Methodist circuit rider, Cartwright rode circuits in Kentucky and Illinois, as well as Tennessee, Indiana, and Ohio. His *Autobiography (1856)* made him nationally prominent.

Peter Cartwright was one of the most colorful frontier preachers in the young United States. Born in Virginia in 1785, just two years after a treaty ended the American Revolution, he was taken West to Kentucky. There he became a tough guy in rough Logan County known as "Rogue's Harbor" because of its swarms of bad men. His Methodist mother pleaded and prayed with him. Her prayers wakened a response. In a camp meeting her sixteen-year-old son was convicted of his sinfulness and need for a Savior. For hours he cried out to God for forgiveness until finally the peace of Christ flooded his soul. At once he joined the Methodist Episcopal Church. Within two years, he was a travelling preacher, bringing the gospel to the backwoods of the new nation. His rough past and hardy constitution served him well for he faced floods, thieves, hunger, and disease.

Frequently rowdies disrupted Cartwright's meetings. When one thug promised to whip him, Cartwright invited the man to step into the woods with him, and do it. The two started for the trees. Leaping over the fence at the edge of the campground, Cartwright landed painfully. He clutched his side. The bully shouted that the preachers was going for a dagger and took to his heels.

Another time Cartwright charged a group of rowdies in the dark, yelling to imaginary forces, "Here! Here! Officers and men, take them!" The troublemakers bolted in panic. Such events gave Cartwright a name and a reputation.

Crowds flocked to hear him. Throughout Kentucky, Tennessee and Illinois, Cartwright preached to hosts of men and women, speaking three hours at a stretch, several times a week. The conviction in his booming voice could make

women weep and strong men tremble. Ten thousand came to Christ through his preaching in meetings that often ran day and night. Cartwright baptized thousands, adding them to the church. Several church buildings were erected at his instigation to house services for the new converts. To answer a desperate need for more preachers, he championed the creation of Methodist colleges. Having schooled himself, he recognized the value of learning. Wherever he went, he left behind religious books and tracts to convert and strengthen souls in his absence. The joy of soul-winning compensated him for all hardships.

Hardships were plentiful. Several times Cartwright went two and three days without food. He once returned from his circuit with just six cents of borrowed money in his pocket. His father had to outfit him with new clothes, saddle, and horse before he could ride again. Travelling preachers were paid a measly \$30-50 dollars a year with no family allowance. Nonetheless, Cartwright married and raised children. His family was not spared tragedy. Forced to camp in the open one night, they were startled awake when a tree snapped in two. Cartwright flung up his arms to deflect the falling log, but it crushed his youngest daughter to death.

In 1823 Peter Cartwright sold his Kentucky farm. He was disturbed by the effects of slavery on consciences and feared his daughters would marry slave owners. Slavery, he felt, sapped independence of spirit. His family readily agreed to the change and his bishop appointed him to a circuit in Illinois.

In Illinois, he more than once braved floods. Once he had to chase his saddle-bags which were swept downstream. Another time, in snowy weather, when even he hesitated to enter a flooded river, his eldest daughter, riding with him, proved her own mettle, urging him onward. In every instance, the Lord brought him to safety. He died at eighty-seven, leaving behind an autobiography which became a classic as much for the exploits it recounted as for the picture it painted of frontier life. His courage won him numerous sons and daughters for Christ.