

# A Veteran's Reminiscences of Fifty Years Ago

REV. ALEXANDER LANGFORD, D.D.

NORSE.—At the Toronto Conference a very happy and inspiring evening session was given up to two addresses from veteran preachers who have for over half a century well and faithfully served the Methodist Church as ministers. These men were Revs. A. Langford, D.D., and Peter Addison. Both are among the best known and most highly esteemed ministers in the Ontario Conference, and the uplift of their reminiscence addresses will long be felt by those who were privileged to listen to them. We esteem it a great privilege to be able to present to our young readers the splendid address of Dr. Langford. We may be in a position to give some of Mr. Addison's reminiscences later on. Such an address as is herewith given should be a blessing to our younger people, and taken in connection with the topic studies of Representative Men of Canadian Methodism as they are running from month to month in our regular series, it should be of very wide interest while especially appropriate to our people in central western Ontario to which Dr. Langford makes more particular reference.—Editor.

ON the first Sabbath in February, 1857, fifty-eight years ago, I stood up a weak, trembling young man, to begin my life work on the Belmont Circuit, near London, Ontario.

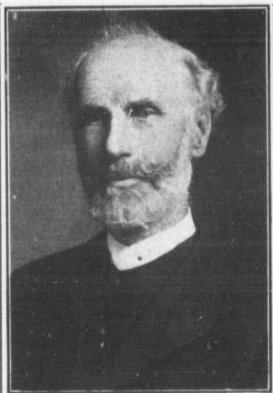
If you will allow a few personal references, I can truthfully say, I am a mystery to myself, and if possible, a greater mystery to my ministerial brethren. My second Superintendent, when he first saw me, mentally settled the question that he would bury me before the year would close. Several eminent physicians told me at different times that I must stop preaching or die. I shall not pursue the subject; I only refer to it to encourage delicate young probationers and to make public acknowledgment of the wonderful upholding power of God who sustained me and helped me in the proclamation of the glorious gospel for fifty consecutive years, and who now, during eight years of a superannuated experience, has granted me the privilege of averaging a little more than one sermon each Sabbath, though not in the "active work" of the ministry.

Entering upon the work in the middle of the Conference year, I was immediately engaged in revival services, for my devoted Superintendent had planned several "protracted meetings."

At Conference, after five months labor on the Belmont Circuit, I was accepted as a candidate for the ministry, having been recommended by the London District Meeting after preaching a "trial sermon," as was customary. The Stationing Committee appointed me to what was then called the "Warwick Mission."

I have no intention of going away from the nineteen places where I labored during the fifty years. I will shut myself up to that one Domestic Mission. I want to help you to realize that the present marvellous growth of our beloved Methodism, in this banner Province of Ontario, has been brought about by the faithful and untiring labors of the circuit-riders, who followed the blaze on the trees through the unbroken forests, forded the swollen streams when there were no bridges, found the new settlers in their scattered shanties, and shared with them in their early struggles for a living, when there were no tempting delicacies upon the table and sometimes not even bread to eat.

The cry from the back townships was an earnest wailing cry, "O give us the gospel, come and baptize our children, and bury our dead. We can pay you little or nothing, but come and preach to us, that our families may not grow up 'wild



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as the untaught Indian's brood." Methodism responded to that call, and sent her missionaries into the wilderness, where they encountered such privations and sufferings as place them in the front rank of the heroic missionaries of the world. Our Church supplied these scattered settlers, holding services in their very humble dwellings, or in log school-houses when such were found; and because we suffered with those early settlers in their privations, lived with them in their hard struggles, they said in later years, "These are the men we want as our pastors, and the Methodist Church is the Church of our preference, for she thought of us, cared for us, preached to us, when we could offer little or no recompense."

And to-day if you enquire, you young people, who cannot go back fifty years, if you ask, "How do you account for the honorable position of Methodism, in this beautiful Province of Ontario and in the Dominion of Canada?" you must turn your thoughts to the generations past. "Ask thy fathers, and they will show thee, thy elders, and they will tell thee."

These of the heroic saddle-bag brigade, these of the backwoods ministry made the problem of this hour. "This evening, I will read up my 'Reminiscences.' I thank thee and the Stationing Committees of early days that I was counted worthy to be a Domestic Missionary."

It pleased the Church in later years to send me to some of the prominent pulpits of several of our Conferences, but in this I glory not, for there has not been a charge entrusted to me during fifty years that gives me more occasion for gladness and rejoicing than the years spent on a Domestic Mission. At the close of the Conference of 1857, I met my Chairman, Rev. John Douse, who asked me if I knew where the Stationing Committee had sent me. I replied that I had been sent to "Warwick Mission." It shall never forget what he said, "Yes, you are down for Warwick Mission, and you could not go to a worse place." Then he added, "Try and stand it for a year, and I promise you that I will give you a change at the end of the year."

When the year was closing, the Official Board invited me to stay with them for a second year, and my beloved Chairman was good enough to allow me to remain. At the close of the second year the Board invited me to remain for a third year, to which I consented; but the Stationing Committee picked me up out of the mud and swamps of that extensive mission field, and sent me to the city of Hamilton, under the superintendence of Rev. Dr. Rice,—to my great and perpetual astonishment.

Now I will return to the Warwick Mission, and try to give you some idea of what mission work meant in the early days of fifty or sixty years ago. First, let me invite you to look at the territory, the geographical dimensions of the mission. It embraced the whole or parts of seven townships. We had sixteen regular appointments besides other preaching places on week evenings, making nineteen appointments in all. It required a month to get around the Mission. The road, where there were roads, were the worst kind of roads you can imagine, frequently for miles through the solid woods. There was only one possible way of getting around my mission, and that was, by becoming a veritable "circuit-rider." This was no difficulty to one who was born and brought up with a cavalry regiment, the grand old historic 5th Dragoon Guards, now gallantly serving in France. I took very kindly to my saddle experience, as cheerfully a duck takes to water. The trouble was there was too much water at times. The country was flat, the clay of a peculiar quality that could hold water, as if that was its special business; and when the water was frozen, but not strong enough to carry a horse, the progress was a snail's pace. I have timed myself under such circumstances and found I was making the splendid record of two miles an hour.

The creeks were numerous, and during spring freshets were dangerous rivers. I have passed through broad streams when my horse was as near the swimming point as I ever want a horse to be when I am on his back. At such times I have been compelled very lovingly to embrace my good steed around the neck with my convenient long legs, so as to keep my feet out of the water and balance myself as best I could on the saddle, with my faithful horse struggling with the quicksand bed of a foaming river. I never thought it necessary in those days to go to a gymnasium, for I had all the gymnastic exercises I required with such experiences as I encountered.

And here let me pay a willing tribute to my noble horse. How the circuit-rider learns to love the faithful animal who has been with him in all his journeyings, hardships and narrow escapes! During these special times of risk and peril I talked with my horse, and explained things to him, and he understood every word. He would listen, and look at me with his intelligent, thoughtful eyes. He lacked only the faculty of speech. I could almost wish that the theory of the resurrection of our dumb animals was reliable and scriptural, for I would prize and enjoy eternal fellowship with my faithful and obedient horse, who carried me around, and shared with me in my early missionary experiences.

Take another way of surveying the territory of my first Mission. I find by