

REPRESENTATIVE MEN OF CANADIAN METHODISM

IV. Nathan Bangs—A Knight of the Saddle Bag

FOR THE LITERARY AND SOCIAL MEETING IN AUGUST. ACTS 13: 1-13.

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IN the home of Christian Warner, in the Niagara Peninsula, in the month of May, 1800, two Methodist ministers were conducting a meeting. These men were Joseph Sawyer and Joseph Jewell, two of the little band of half a dozen itinerants who held the whole Province of Upper Canada for Methodism in that early day. The meeting they were conducting was like many another held in the pioneer homes of that new Province, but its far-reaching results for Methodism and for the kingdom of God may never be measured.

In the audience that evening was a young man named Nathan Bangs who had recently come into Canada from the State of New York. For some time this young man had been under deep religious conviction. At the invitation of Christian Warner he had come to this meeting hoping to get help. Joseph Sawyer was the preacher. His theme was The Beatitudes. Writing later of the effect of this sermon upon him, Bangs said, "As the preacher discoursed on 'Blessed are they that mourn,' he unfolded all the enigmas of my heart more fully than I could myself." Further conversation with the leaders of that meeting led this young man into full faith in Jesus Christ as his Saviour and to a determination to serve Him. That meeting settled the question of the life work of Nathan Bangs and brought into the ministry of the Methodist Episcopal Church a man who was second only to Asbury in his influence upon the polity and work of the church of his choice.

Nathan Bangs had come to Canada in the closing year of the 18th century under the impulse of a restless spirit that sought adventure in a new country. He had received a good public school education in Connecticut, the state of his birth. From his father he had learned the art of surveying. From Connecticut the family had removed, while Nathan was still a boy, to the back woods of New York State. Into their settlement came the ubiquitous Methodist itinerants and nearly the whole Bangs family were converted and several members of the family became preachers. But Nathan knew Methodism at first only to despise it. With a sister and her husband he came to the Niagara peninsula, where he seems to have engaged in public school teaching, until, with his conversion came a call to the ministry.

The impulse to tell others of the grace that had saved him was irresistible. From house to house he went declaring what God had done for his soul. He exhorted the people to seek his mercy and prayed with those who would permit him. Some mocked, some wept and some received the word with joy.

About this time Nathan Bangs became an inmate of Christian Warner's home. To this godly man he owed his advancement in religion. Warner was at this time a class leader and exhorter. His advice and teaching led young Bangs to seek entire sanctification. The secret of the success of the early Methodist itinerants was their knowledge of and insistence upon holiness of heart and life. Their converts were not left in the early stages of the Christian life; they were led on, step by step to the richer and riper experiences of the new life.

It was due to Joseph Sawyer that Nathan Bangs came into the ministry of the Methodist Church. As an assistant to Sawyer he did good work in the Niagara Peninsula. In the fall of 1801, he began as a regular itinerant. His first circuit was the Niagara and Grand River District. It comprised 2,400 square miles of territory. Of this circuit Bangs wrote in his journal: "The settlements were new, the roads were bad, the fare hard; but God was with us in much mercy, awakening and converting sinners, and this was abundant compensation for all our toils."

But he was not always encouraged by such results. Often a whole community turned a deaf ear to his preaching. And once he was so discouraged that he resolved to give up preach-

ing and go home. But a dream that came to him led him to see that what God required of him was faithfulness and not results. He returned to his task and a gracious revival soon rewarded his efforts.

In 1802, in company with Joseph Jewell, his presiding elder, he set out for the Bay of Quinte District. Through mud and water they reached Little York (now Toronto). Here they found a settlement extending some thirty miles up Yonge street. Conditions in this settlement were similar to those they had left in the Niagara District. The roads were bad, the people were poor and in many cases they cared little about spiritual things. But Bangs and his superintendent went from house to house preaching wherever they could get a congregation, and many a heart was lighter and many a home was brighter for their coming. The rude hospitality of that early day was freely extended to them. Now it was an Indian's hut and now it was the home of a white man in which they found food and shelter. On the way Bangs's horse died, but a gentleman loaned him another, and on he went until he reached the Bay District.

In the fall of 1802 an epidemic of typhus fever broke out among his parishioners. Bangs himself took the fever and for several months was unable to preach. His voice never fully recovered from the effects of this sickness. After two years of hard work on the slender allowance of \$20 a quarter, Bangs left the Bay of Quinte circuit for the New York Conference. On his way to conference he visited his aged parents and, later in his journey was entertained at the beautiful home of Freeborn Garrettsen, "whose wife, born to opulence, kept open doors for weary itinerants while her husband was abroad on errands of salvation."

At the New York Conference Nathan Bangs was ordained Deacon and then Elder that he might have authority to administer the sacraments. Before leaving Canada he had heard of the need of the Thames River District. He felt the call of the "Far West," as this part of Ontario was then called. With Bishop Asbury's consent he was appointed to open up a mission among the settlers who had gone into this new country. Conference being over he at once saddled his horse for a ride of 600 miles through swamp and forest to a region hitherto untraversed by any itinerant. Like a true "Knight of the Saddle Bag," he fared forth to face danger and privation in the wilderness, that he might prove himself to be a good soldier of the Lord Jesus Christ.

It was during this itinerary that Nathan Bangs visited the home of the writer's great grandfather in Essex County. It was in the year 1804. Following the blazed trail through the Longwoods up to Chatham, he pressed on down the Thames River and then across to the settlements along the shores of Lake Erie through the Townships of Romney, Mersea, Gosfield and Colchester on to Amherstburg and Detroit. These townships had been settled in 1795 by U. E. Loyalists who had come in from the United States. To them the coming of the first circuit rider was a momentous event. Gladly they obeyed the summons to gather in some neighbor's house to hear the gospel preached.

From Nathan Bangs' own journal we have an account of how he conducted his meetings and how his preaching was received. He says of one of his meetings: "At the appointed hour the house was crowded. I commenced the service by remarking that when a stranger appears in these new countries the people are usually curious to know his name, whence he comes, whither he is bound and what is his errand. I will try to satisfy you in brief. My name is Nathan Bangs. I was born in Connecticut, May 2nd, 1778. I was born again in this Province May, 1800. I commenced itinerating as a preacher of the gospel in the month of Sept., 1801. On the 18th of June of the present year (1804), I left New York for the purpose of visiting you of whom I had heard about