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THE REMINISCENCES OF AN ITINERANT PREACHER

by Richard McKendree Tydings
Introduction by Ruth S. Irvin

Richard McKendree Tydings, an itinerant Methodist preacher, served his church in Florida from 1851 until near the end of his life in 1890. His yearly mission assignments, broken only by seven years of service in Arkansas, took him from one part of Florida to another. After his return to Florida from Arkansas in 1880, he wrote his “Reminiscenses” which appeared sequentially in the Christian Advocate, a Methodist publication. Tydings finished his “Reminiscenses” in 1882 while living at Anthony, in Marion County, where he found a permanent home at last and continued his preaching. He died there on December 27, 1890.

Richard McKendree was the son of Richard Tydings, an itinerant Methodist preacher, who preached in Pennsylvania before moving to Kentucky in 1828. Born in Pittsburgh in 1828, young Richard grew up in Kentucky to become an itinerant preacher like his father. He was the grandson of the Reverend Wesley Adams, a regular Methodist minister, who had moved to the wilds of Florida in the Tallahassee area in 1827, when Florida was yet a territory. After suffering a loss of health in Kentucky, Richard ("a walking skeleton") came to Florida to visit his grandfather during the winter season of 1850 to seek a cure.

The infirmities of age and a partial paralysis of the tongue prevented Wesley Adams from preaching in his later years, but he and Richard made many pleasant excursions in north Florida, south Georgia, and the Gulf Coast area. Richard’s health improved greatly. It was then that he took up his work again, and only five years after Florida had become a state, he accepted an appointment to the Tampa-Manatee mission field.

In 1850 Richard began a series of yearly missions that took him to almost every part of pioneer Florida where settlers could be found. His experiences confirmed his love for the “land of flowers” and shaped his high regard not only for the people he served, but also for the friends he made in every walk of life.

Richard married Louisa Helen Bryant in 1860. “Loulie” was the niece of Colonel James William Bryant, founder of the St. Johns River town of Welaka. Richard’s yearly moves, from that time on, included his family. William E. Tydings and Mary Louise Tydings Whatley of West Palm Beach are his grandson and granddaughter. They have preserved an old family scrapbook containing his “Reminiscenses” and also some of his yearly journals, on which he based his “Reminiscenses.”

The account of Tydings’ stay in the Tampa-Manatee mission field reveals this sparsely settled area as he found it in 1851. The memoir also relates his travel experiences from Tallahassee to St. Marks, by steamer to Key West, back to Manatee and Tampa, and finally his return to Tallahassee during a big freeze in January, 1852. His “Reminiscenses” are rich in description and
Richard McKendree Tydings.

Photograph courtesy of the author.
friendly encounters, many of them with well known historical figures. His mission concluded with the successful completion of the first church built in Tampa. Seen from the perspective of time, the entire account has a jewel-like quality, and it is truly a Florida pioneer odyssey, as well.

Richard, together with friends, took a steamer at St. Marks bound for Key West during the first week of February, 1851. The trip took six days. He stayed in Key West for three weeks waiting for passage to the Manatee-Tampa area, the most southern Methodist mission field in Florida except for the island of Key West. He left Key West on March 5, 1851, on the scooner Sprague and after a short and pleasant run up the coast landed at Manatee. His account of his Tampa-Manatee mission (including some errors in spelling and punctuation) follows.

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Manatee

In my last letter I mentioned my arrival from Key West, at Manatee, and kind reception by the family of Rev. Franklin Branch, M.D.

This settlement being one of the regular preaching places on the mission, I subsequently visited it once a month, and always greatly enjoyed my visits, spending at least a week among my flock here each time. The Manatee is a broad, tide river, as far up as the writer ascended, and its mouth is east of entrance into the great bay of Espiritu Santo, at Egmont Key, so that the sea breezes from the Gulf have unobstructed passage up the stream. On the north shore was a large body of rich hammock land peculiarly adapted to the cultivation of the sugar cane, with few persons living on that side except the negroes who worked on the sugar plantations. On the south bank the land was higher and covered with pine woods, and here was situated the church building, being the principal settlement. There was no town there at that date, but the inhabitants were scattered along the pine bluff, with plantations in a light, high hammock, a short distance to the south.

The river derived its name from the fact that it was once a favorite resort of a very large fish, with an udder like a cow, called by the Spaniards manatee. It is still a great fish stream, and the mullet, caught with the cast net, constituted a daily article of diet here. During the year I enjoyed several fishing excursions down the river with the Branch brothers, John, Franklin and Orson. On one occasion the Doctor accompanied us on a trip to Terracea Bay. The mode of fishing was gigging. One pushed the boat with a pole slowly and smoothly along, while the rest of us stood with grains in hand, ready to send the barbed spear, or miniature harpoon, into any of the finny tribe we might discover feeding along the sandy and shallow margin. “Created! what a fish,” and the Doctor’s spear would go whirling after the darting fish, often capturing a rather diminutive specimen, notwithstanding his excited exclamation, as he made the strike. He certainly made double the number of strikes, if he did not capture more game than his more deliberate boys. We had fine success fishing, and also killed some pink curlews at Bird Island. It seemed to me that a large vessel might have been loaded with young birds of the various species that build on this island. The noise of the old birds, and the screams of the frightened young ones as we landed was truly deafening, for the report of our guns could scarcely be heard.
Many pleasant visits were made during the year, to the hospitable mansion of Dr. Joseph A. Braden. The building was of concrete, composed of sand, shells and lime, forming a wall that hardens by time. The lime was obtained by burning shells which are found upon the Manatee in vast beds. A Mr. Robert Gamble was erecting on the Northern side of the river a concrete building, the mortar being first formed into blocks and hardened in the sun. He was living, temporarily, in a small adobe, the only house of the kind, I suppose, in the State. The walls were composed of the natural soil surrounding it, protected from the rains by widely projecting eaves.

Dr. Braden, at the time I write of, was not connected with the Methodist Church, but subsequently he and all the family joined, and he became a zealous local preacher.

With such a local preacher as Dr. Franklin Branch, and such a leader as Bro. Ezekiel Glazier, (since licensed to preach) living in their midst, I need hardly say, that I found the society here in a healthy condition. Its white membership numbered only twenty, but some additions were made during the year. I remember that at a prayer meeting, one Saturday night, held in Bro. Branch’s parlor, several souls were blessed with a sense of pardoning love, and on the night following, as no private house was large enough to contain the congregation, we assembled in the dining hall of Judge Josiah Gates’ new hotel. The building was not quite finished and the family had not yet moved into it so that its first use was for divine worship. In the opening of the meeting, five of Judge Gates’ children were baptized, and at the close, five persons joined on probation, the wife and eldest daughter of Mr. Gates being among the number.

I found Dr. Branch a very pleasant companion, and true friend, and became greatly attached to himself and family. It was with uncommon pleasure that I welcomed into the Florida Conference, Frank and Orson, the sons of Dr. Branch, and have watched with fatherly interest their careers. They have done good service. May God continue to bless and prosper them.

* * *

Tampa

The only mode of communication between Manatee and Tampa in 1851 was by the sloop, Mary Navis, Captain Bishop, which carried the mail, and that only once a week. When the sloop, during the summer, was being repainted, I had to take passage in a small sailboat. On one occasion, going down the bay, we were out all night.

Well, Tampa, in 1851, was a small village, which had grown up around Fort Brook [sic], at the mouth of the Hillsboro river, and is really not on Tampa Bay, but at the head of the Hillsboro Bay. There were no sidewalks then, and the sand was so deep that we young men would invite the girls to go wadeing [sic], as anything like graceful walking was impossible. The grounds around the garrison were set in grass, and beautifully shaded by large live oaks.

There was preaching by no other denomination but the Methodist, and that on two Sabbaths in the month only. A member of this society, brother John Whidden, dying, bequeathed five hundred dollars towards building a Methodist Church, to which had been added three hundred dollars on subscription, and the building was in process of erection. In the meantime we worshipped in the Courthouse. The membership amounted to nineteen whites, the list headed by the
name of Rev. Leroy G. Lesley, formerly a member of the Florida Conference. Brother Lesley had ceased to itinerate, and settled at this far distant point of our southern territory on account of disease of the throat. For this reason he could not assist me much in preaching, but I found him in full sympathy with my work, and a friend and brother indeed. He not only superintended the erection of the church building, but did much of the work with his own hands.

A little incident in connection with the building of this house I will relate as it is characteristic of the man, and the donor’s name has since become so celebrated. I was on a visit to the keeper of the lighthouse, Dr. Jamison, on Egmont Key, when I was introduced by him to Major T. J. Jackson, U.S.A. As by his invitation we strolled up the beautiful beach, he informed me that he had been stationed for a long time in the interior, without religious privileges or associations. He had been in bad health ever since the close of the Mexican War, and the mild climate of Florida having failed to restore it, he had obtained a long furlough, and intended to try the benefits of travel. When we returned, after a long stroll, to the neighborhood of the Lighthouse, he begged me, if not too much fatigued, to continue our walk, stating that it had been so long since he had enjoyed the privilege of conversing with anyone on the subject of religion, that he feared he would weary me. I found from his conversation that he was a humble Christian. I believe he stated that he was a member of the Presbyterian Church. He was certainly a devout soldier, and loved to talk upon the subject of religion. He inquired with great interest all about my mission, and when I mentioned that we were trying to build a house of worship at Tampa, he begged me to accept of a small contribution towards it, saying that he wished to have some interest in so good an enterprise. His contribution of five dollars was in gold coin. I was not surprised to hear, during the late civil war, that Major General T.J. (Stonewall) Jackson was a man of prayer.

In those days the preacher had to board around. My first home was with a Mrs. Alexander Martin, the widow of a Methodist preacher, and a very pleasant home it proved to be. Next I boarded with Bro. Lesley, and then with a Bro. Andrew J. Henderson. Much of my leisure time was spent at the garrison, in the agreeable company of Lieut. Thornley S. Everett, who was in command of Fort Brooke, who although a member of the Episcopal Church, I found a warm friend and helper of the missionary.

The Sparkman Neighborhood

The mission included a settlement seventeen miles east of Tampa, known as the Sparkman neighborhood. Once a month brother Henderson furnished me a horse and saddle, and I generally stopped for dinner and rest with a brother Jas. Goff, whose family now reside in Lake City. As there was no church building the meetings were held at the residence of Capt. S. Simon Sparkman. There were twenty eight names on the Church roll at this point, but scattered from the Hillsboro, along the Alafia, to the head of the Manatee. Of course I did not see some of the members often at the meetings, and having to ride one of brother Henderson’s wagon horses, was necessitated to make my visits to this neighborhood short, and was unable to visit them at their homes. At the close of the year, thanks to the efforts of the Sparkman brothers, a log church was ready for occupation, and was dedicated on Christmas day. We named it Bethlehem. The country east of Tampa was, for about ten miles out, flat and quite poor, and at that time very sparsely settled. The settlers were small planters, but large cattle raisers. That region then, as now, shipped their beef cattle to the Island of Cuba. Those employed to load a vessel, would not
only gather up their own cattle, but any they came across, fit for shipment. This arrangement saved the cattle ship from unnecessary delay, and was well understood by the stockraisers. The marks and brands, (at Tampa) were taken by the county Clerk, which saved the contractors from difficulty when the owners of stock thus taken without their knowledge came to be paid. Things in general were after a primitive fashion in those days. Buggies were rare; carriages, none. The usual style was a cart, the driver astride the pony or mule, feet on the shafts, and knees nearly on a level with the head. The cowboys were daring riders; their usual gait, a lope; and they almost lived in the saddle. A facetious Northener declared that all they cared about in the way of dress was “a shirt and a pair of spurs.”

* * *

**Trip to Fort Myers**

Sometime in the spring – I think it was April - I took, by invitation, a trip on the U.S. steamer, Fashion, to Fort Myers on the Caloosahachie [sic] river, one hundred miles south of Tampa. The only passengers aboard were the Paymaster, Colonel Harvey Brown, and the Indian Agent, General Luther Blake. Colonel B. was going to pay the soldiers at Fort Myers, and General Blake was to hold a conference with Billy Bowlegs, and other principal men about the Florida Seminoles, with regard to their emigration westward.

The mornings after our departure from Tampa, we came to anchor in Charlotte Harbor, and proceeded up the Caloosahachie, in the steamer's yawl, rowed by four lusty sailors. I think the distance up to the Fort was over ten miles. I was here the guest of Major John H. Winder, afterwards General Winder, who had charge of the Libby prison, at Richmond, Virginia during the war.

A few Indians came in to trade, but Billy Bowlegs and party did not make their appearance, as they had agreed to do, for conference with the Indian Agent. I saw Bowlegs afterwards, when on his way to Washington, in company with Johnie Jumper, a commissioner from the Seminoles, located in the Indian Territory, and old Abraham, the interpreter, (a full blood negro,) and when I mentioned my trip to Fort Myers, and disappointment that he did not come in according to promise, he gave me a knowing smile and the shrug of the shoulders so peculiar to the Indian, for answer. He evidently did not wish to see the agent at that time to discuss the removal of his tribe to the West. Billy pretended that he was in favor of removal but that Sam Jones, the head chief would never consent. That if the United States would let the Seminoles alone until Sam Jones, who was very old, should die, then they would leave Florida without giving further trouble. General Blake said that he was the last white man who had seen the old chief, and as that was some years previous he believed that Sam Jones was dead, and that Billy, not wishing to flatly refuse to emigrate, used this objection simply to gain time, as also this trip to Washington, to have a talk with the Great Father, the President. From his name, I expected to see a bow-legged man, but found him a well formed good looking Indian, stout built, but rather below the average height. He was named after his maternal uncle. The Seminoles, showing their opinion of the virtue of their women, by a law preferred a successor to the deceased chief a son of the chief's sister, to one of his sons who might possibly have none of the chief s blood in his veins.
Billy’s politeness was excessive, he being apprehensive that as he passed through the states some white man whose relative had been murdered by the Indians should after the Indian code of morals, take vengeance, on him. He was a brave and wily chieftan, as the government found out to their cost for they never could drive him from the swampgirt home in the everglades, until in 1857, they turned this difficult enterprise over to the State government. The volunteer soldiers, fighting Indian fashion, penetrated their secret fortresses, burned their houses and destroyed their crops. Finding that the cowboys, as our troops were contemptuously designated were very different enemies to deal with from the soldiers of the regular army, the Indians gave up the unequal struggle, and emigrated westward.

The day passed slowly away at the Fort vainly awaiting the appearance of the Indian. A heavy rain at night prevented me from preaching to the soldiers, which was my main object in this visit. There was no army chaplain in this part of the State and no one had preached the blessed gospel to these poor soldiers in years. The mosquitoes were exceedingly numerous at this point, and I should have spent a sleepless night, but for the kindness of a stranger, D.P. Holland, who generously gave up his bunk and mosquito net to me. How he fared in the contest with the avenging pests that night, he never would confess. We left early next morning as the Fashion had to visit other military points and could wait for us no longer.

**Return to Tallahassee**

The first of January, 1852, found your correspondent still in Tampa. The Conference was to convene in Tallahassee, and how to get there was a very serious problem in those days. The stage route was both tiresome and expensive, and there was no regular communication by ship with St. Marks; but a gracious providence provided. A young man – James McDonnell, of Early county, Georgia, who was on a visit to a sister in Tampa – very kindly offered me a seat in his buggy. He had to take with him as far as Lake Harris his little nephew – who had been attending school in Tampa – and who is now the proprietor of the celebrated grove on Orange Lake, in Marion County, (Harris’ Grove) perhaps the largest in the State. Mr. Harris (McDonnell’s brother-in-law) – after whom, I suppose, the Lake was named – had emigrated from Georgia to this part of Southern Florida for the benefit of his health. He had been a great sufferer from rheumatism. The change had effected a complete cure. Around his residence he had planted large sour orange trees, taken from the hammock adjacent, and budded to the sweet orange. On a beautiful inlet in the lake he had budded another grove, just where nature had planted the trees. Although it was now January, he had not yet manufactured his sugar crop, and the year before – if I remember right he had not finished grinding before the month of March. Many of the canes were in tassel; the first I had ever seen. Since my visit in 1852, Mr. Harris has sold his beautiful place on the lake and removed to Ocala, where he keeps an excellent hotel. Two years ago, while attending the Conference there, I had the pleasure of dining (by invitation) with Mr. Harris and his excellent wife, and talking over old times.

The day we left Lake Harris an exceedingly cold rain set in, changing in the afternoon to sleet. I vividly remember, to this day, how much I suffered with cold, and how welcome was the ruddy glare of a pine knot fire from the open door of the house we expected to stop at, as it was now some time after dark. There were few settlers on the road we had passed over, and about dusk we
had seen a large herd of deer gazing quietly at us as we passed by. Mentioning the circumstance to our host, he offered to lay a wager that he could show us forty deer the next day if we would remain over and go hunting. The next morning the sleet-covered forests displayed a scene of dazzling beauty.

In passing the scene of Dade’s defeat Mr. McDonnell pointed out the position of the U.S. soldiers in the open glade as they fought the ambushed foe hidden in the tall grass on the border of a small lake. In obedience to military tactics, here these brave men stood until all but one was massacred, and he was left on the field for dead. He also mentioned that a piece of cannon had been found recently in the shallow lake, where the Indians – not knowing how to use the big gun – had hidden it.

Florida is remarkable for its underground streams – a chain of “sinks” indicating their mysterious course. These sinks are formed – I suppose – by the wearing away of the upper crust of soil until it becomes too weak to uphold the superincumbent earth, it suddenly sinks into the cave formed beneath it. We passed one of these sinks somewhere on the route through Marion county formed across the road Mr. McDonnell had travelled the winter before. A considerable area had instantly given way, and sinking to such a depth that the tops of several tall pines were just visible above the water, which now filled the sink. Fortunately, no person was passing the road at the time.

From the day we left Mr. George McClellan’s, eighteen miles west of Lake City, until my journey’s end, the cold was the severest I have ever witnessed in this latitude. Between Madison and Monticello the small streams were frozen over so hard that they bore up horse and buggy in passing. We were almost frozen when we stopped at the pleasant home of my uncle, D. Williams, in Monticello, for dinner, but in the afternoon we pushed on to the home of my dear old Grandfather, Rev. Wesley Adams, where I and my generous friend, James McDonnell, parted company.

The Conference met in Tallahassee, where I was elected to Elder’s orders and ordained by Bishop Andrew. When the appointments were announced my name was read out for St. Mary’s Georgia.