A PIONEER PREACHER

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Experiences of a Faithful Minister Who Turned Bar-Room Counters into Pulpits

One of the ablest and most eloquent pulpit orators in California, says the Sacramento *Bee*, is Rev. Dr. J.C. Simmons, pastor of the M.E. Church, South at Chico.

On a recent Sunday evening in that city

he preached his thirty-fifth anniversary

sermon, telling at length the story of his

work in the vineyard of the Pacific Coast.

Dr. Simmons is a man of much ability,

who has produced a number of able works in relation to religious subjects. He has a clear, ringing voice, and possesses

the power of holding his audiences. At times his hearers are highly amused, and again they are in tears. As a public speaker he has but few equals. He is a man of fine appearance, and his hair and beard are as white as snow.

He is the son of an honored Methodist preacher of the Georgia Conference, and was born in Butte County, Georgia, in 1827. He graduated from Emory College, at Oxford, Ga., in 1848, and was ordained to preach a few days after receiving his diploma. In 1852 he was sent as a missionary to California, reaching San Francisco in February of that year.

The doctor relates that the first objects that attracted his attention upon stepping from the ship were the immense gambling saloons, brilliantly lighted and crowded with men, with here and there a woman seated at a table superintending a game. Great piles of gold lay in the utmost profusion on the tables. Shrewd and well-dressed gangsters were on hand to fleece the roughly-dressed miners, large numbers of whom were on hand staking and losing their treasures on the turn of a card. He at once concluded here was a field that needed religious influence, and he longed to be at work.

He was present and assisted in the organization of the Pacific Annual Conference of the M.E. Church, South, in April, 1852, and is the only remaining member of that first conference in California. The doctor was sent to perform his first work in the mines. His first sermon in California was preached in Sacramento, where he stopped one day while on his way to Grass Valley.

He had a rough experience from the day he left Sacramento, but he stood up bravely. As he left this city he was homesick, but his thoughts were soon absorbed, while rolling along in the old stage coach, admiring the lovely Sacramento Valley, which was not gemmed, as now, with fine farm houses, vineyards, orchards and gardens, but one wide, flower-spangled plain. As he arrived in Nevada City at night snow was falling rapidly. The crooked streets were crowded with miners and the gambling halls were wide open. The “parsonage” where he was to stop was a rough shed made of “shakes,” built to the end of the church, which was constructed of the same material. It was rather hard to turn into such a building, where the rude blasts of the Sierra could sweep through. But that was the style of buildings all over the town. The preacher opened his commission at Grass Valley on the Sunday following his arrival at the mines. The “church” consisted of nothing but the frame-work, and Dr. Simmons set to work and completed it with his own hands. His congregation consisted mostly of men, and few of them at that. If half a dozen ladies were present it was considered wonderful. It was desperate work trying to convert men who had gone into the mines, tasted of the gold excitement, cast off all restraint and plunged recklessly into any and everything that came along. And, yet, some of the wildest of the men had themselves been preachers and professors “back in the States.”

The doctor traveled from mine to mine on foot, and he was acquainted with every gold-hunter for miles around. He ate with the, slept with them at night, but often alone under a tree. He preached to them on Sundays, attended to them in sickness and buried their dead. He preached under tree, in cabins, in saloons, ten-pin alleys ad gambling halls. On many occasions he would stand in a saloon behind a bar, which he would use for a pulpit, while his congregation of miners, all heavily armed with pistols and knives, would sit on the whisky barrels while he urged them to “buy gold tried in the fire, that they might be rich.” During these discourses he would frequently be interrupted by some drunk or “holy terror,” who would swagger up to the bar and growl out: “Say, parson, won’t you give us a drink!” But such intrusions usually ended by a couple of miners grabbing up the offender and throwing him out the door, and giving a significant warning by tapping their pistols that he had better not repeat the trick. Just as soon as the preacher would end his discourse the bar tender would quickly take his place behind the bar, and in a few minutes would be heard the rattle and jingle of glasses.

During his visit to French Corral, then one of the liveliest camps in the mountains, Dr. Simmons used to preach his sermons in a great gambling hall, standing upon one of the gaming tables. Before the sermon would be ended some sport would take his hat and pass through the crowd, remarking: “Boys, the parson can’t afford to do all that talking for nothing, so you’d better ante a piece.” The “ante” was always large.

After leaving the mines, the doctor was stationed at Stockton, San Jose and Sacramento, respectively, being in this city in in 1862, during the big flood. Since then he has been located in San Francisco and other important places. He has preached nearly five thousand sermons, besides delivering numberless lectures and speeches, without a single year’s rest.

Although well along in years, the pioneer preacher is in the best of health, and will doubtless be spared for many more years to perform his work. He is

known from one end of the State to the other, and is universally liked.

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