

Jedediah Webb – Texas Circuit Rider

Chpt. 2

Summer 1877

On the preacher circuit between Jacksboro and Breckenridge is the Salt Creek Community as well as the town of Graham. The Methodist Church in Graham was recently established in 1874. The Methodist conference assigned a full-time preacher to this charge, so my duties there are to help with camp meetings and visit families around the Salt Creek and Fort Belknap areas. Although Fort Belknap was decommissioned many years ago in 1859, there are still many civilian families in the area that need attention. I share the visitations in this area with other traveling preachers. Often times, a community which consists of several congregations will pool their resources and build one church to share all the different worship services. I believe the community north of Graham is ready to build such a church; and until a building is erected, I will continue to hold Methodist worship services in selected homes. When the time is right, the Methodist community will erect their own building.

As I set out for the Salt Creek community, I muse about my experiences with the people in that area. Some of the outspoken people have expressed that I am far too young and inexperienced to handle the responsibilities of a spiritual leader. I understand that sentiment, but I believe that I am an exception to this thinking. Even though I am only 25 years-old, I have been 40 years-old all my life. My mother tells me I was always more mature than anyone my age as I grew up. I always associated with people older than me. In that way, I really missed much of my childhood. Chores on the ranch kept me busy as a child. As a teenager, if not doing schoolwork, I would be working. Since I was 12 years old, I apprenticed with a local blacksmith. A person grows up quick when working with red hot forges and molten metals. Swinging the sledgehammers and carrying heavy loads of metal and wood built up my physique and produced muscles that come in handy on the trail.

At 15 years old, I began working with the local marshal in Dublin. He taught me the basics of law enforcement. I learned how to apprehend law breakers, and I learned to shoot with accuracy, speed, and efficiency. The most valuable lessons I learned from the law enforcement work was to take things slowly and methodically whenever possible and think before acting. Conversely, if the situation called for immediate action, I learned to not hesitate and to think and act quickly. This type of thinking helps me on the trail as life-and-death decisions come into play entirely too often.

The folks in Graham are also interesting to me as they are a tight community and do not readily accept outsiders. They are quite determined to know who a new person is before they pass judgment on their worth. I have been asked many times, "Are you a

Cattleman or Sheepman?" The answer to this question determines immediate acceptance or rejection. Technically I am both as I help my father raise both sheep and cattle on our ranch; however, I know the right answer to this question is a resounding "I am a Cattleman of course!" The Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association was recently created this past February under an oak tree on Salt Creek, so cattle is king in Young County!

About 10 miles East of Graham, my friend Willie Lockhart caught up with me on the road. He said, "I figured I better travel with you a bit since some Indian renegades are on the loose from the reservations. I can help you protect yourself. Besides, I need some more scalps to sell for bounty." I have known Willie since I was a child. Willie is ten years older than I am, yet we struck up a friendship long ago. I know that Willie is filled with hate and rage against the Indians – especially the Comanches. I understand why forgiveness is not easy for Willie or any of us who have been done terribly wrong by others. Willie's mother and two sisters were brutally murdered in an Indian raid about 10 years ago. The renegades made off with all of his father's horses and stock. They also burned down the cabin and desecrated the bodies of the mother and the girls. Perhaps part of Willie's grieving is due to the fact that he was drunk and passed out during the raid and was not able to offer help.

Willie says, "I will spend the rest of my life exacting revenge on the Comanches and any other redskin devil I come upon. I tell Willie that the Bible is very specific about taking revenge on others. Our Lord God says that "*Revenge is mine*" (**Deuteronomy 32:35**) and Jesus tells us to love our enemies (**Matthew 5:44**). Revenge and hatred are evil to the human spirit. They choke out the joy that God means us to have. Satan knows this, and he is willing to do whatever it takes to manipulate us to be angry with God over the evils of this world. Satan celebrates each time he sees someone walk away from God. I share these thoughts with Willie, but he is not ready to accept my advice to ask God to free him from his anger and guilt.

I stay several days in the Salt Creek area as there are weddings, funerals, communion services, and baptisms to preside over or assist with. It is not uncommon for these activities to be waiting for me when I arrive at a destination. Living in the wilderness is very different from town-living. When someone dies in the country, burials are not put on hold. Often words are said over the body as it is interred, and the formal funeral takes place when the traveling preacher arrives. Weddings and baptisms are likely planned around the preacher's circuit travels. It is not uncommon to preside over an official church wedding after a couple has already said their own vows and cohabitated. Communion services are a "must do" activity in every place that I stop. As for baptisms, those are always planned in advance, and I know those are waiting for me. Methodists don't usually perform baptismal immersion, but I really enjoy getting into a river for those who want the total immersion experience. Jesus didn't instruct us specifically on how to baptize, but He tells us to be sure and do it (**Matthew 28:18-20**). I take baptism seriously. I do not believe it is absolutely necessary for gaining entrance into heaven, but it is an outward sign of an inward desire to follow Jesus. It signifies a

new beginning – a washing clean of sin – and a desire to leave the old life behind and walk in the light of the Lord. I believe God celebrates with singing when we baptize one of His own.

Willie continues the journey with me as we leave the Salt Creek-Graham Community and head out for the Breckenridge area. This town actually started as Fort Picketville. It was established in 1854 as a protection for the settlers in the area. It was recently decommissioned, and those who settled around the fort named their community Picketville. The name of the town was recently changed to Breckenridge after it was designated as the county seat for Stephens County.

With the forts and the soldiers constantly moving around to stem the illegal and brutal activities of Indians, bandits, and just plain evil people; I wonder if peace will ever come to this section of Texas. Will there be a time when Indian raids, marauding thieves and law breakers are suppressed? What will it take to do so? And what about the world in general? Has there ever been an hour of complete peace across the entire world since Adam and Eve were evicted from the Garden of Eden? The Bible tells us there will always be war and rumors of war, *"And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not troubled; for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom"* (Matthew 24:6-7). I believe that humankind is incapable of eliminating hatred, jealousy, and covetousness; thereby achieving world-wide peace on their own. Only Jesus will accomplish this when he returns to bring heaven to Earth. Not only will people be at peace but nature itself will be calm - no more floods, tornados, hurricanes, droughts, and so on. Even the animals will lie down together and feed on plants rather than one another (Isaiah 11:6). What a world to look forward to!

Speaking of nature, it had rained all the previous night and all morning on Willie and me as we slowly traversed toward the area known as "Arkansas" in a bend of the Clear Fork of the Brazos River several miles south of Graham. The Brazos River is 1,280 miles in its entirety, and its name means "River of the Arms of God." It didn't feel so much like we were in God's arms that morning as the normally calm river was a swollen, torrential death trap. We were forced to divert our travel several miles to the east in order to find a good crossing place.

The sun made an appearance and bathed us in warmth. All was right with the world - a sure sign that something might go wrong just around the corner. Sure enough, we came across three very unsavory looking characters as we broke through some thick brush. Now, I don't like to be suspicious of people based upon their appearance, but this time my instincts were leading me in the right direction. These boys looked like they were exhausted, and their horses looked to have been ridden hard. These boys also appeared to be without food and other supplies usually needed for the trail. They were lying on the ground resting but appeared alert to our approach. I couldn't help but notice some hands on their pistols. All indicators pointed to these men being on the run from someone or something.

I shouldn't have been surprised by the fact that Willie knew who they were. Willie has been known to run with some questionable characters. Willie introduced them to me as Jake Colter, Boyd Simmons, and Sam Johnson – all from the Comanche area. I had heard these names before, but I had never met them as they spend no time at church. Willie introduced me to them as the circuit rider who provides pastoring for the circuit which includes their hometown, Comanche.

Jake looked up at me with a sneer as he pulled a nearly empty whisky bottle out of his saddlebag. "You wouldn't happen to have some whisky or tobacco would ya?" I told him that I do, but it is for someone else along my route. His countenance worsened as he got up and pointed at me. "You should know we run with Wes, and we always get what we want." I knew that "running with Wes" meant that he and his two compadres were claiming to be part of the John Wesley Hardin gang which was notorious for theft, murder, rape, extortion, and a dozen other crimes. I became well acquainted with their reputation as I worked for the Dublin marshal in my younger years.

"Maybe so" I said, "but I always keep what I want to keep, and those who want to take it away usually pay a high price." We both froze with our hands near our pistols. By the way, one of my Texas Ranger friends gifted me with one of the finest revolvers made to date – the Colt Single-Action Army Revolver. It is highly durable and accurate. It also has interchangeable cartridges to use with my rifle – the Winchester 1873 model. I am quite well-healed for a traveling preacher; but in this stretch of wild and sparsely populated country, it is necessary. I also admit that I am not the fastest with a draw, but I am more accurate than most. By the grace of God, I have not had to draw on anyone...yet. As I said earlier, I am not willing to allow someone to easily put me out of commission. I have important work to do for Jesus.

After a few tense seconds, Willie stepped in. "Now hold on you two. I don't want to lose one or both of you friends over a bag of tobacco or a bottle of whisky." Jake looked at Willie and laughed, "Neither do I. Let's sit and swig awhile." The glance he gave me as he moved to sit told me that this was far from over in his mind.

I am familiar with John Wesley Hardin and his gang. I personally know his father, James G. Hardin, a Methodist circuit rider himself. I couldn't help but wonder that James had instructed his sons John and Joe in the ways of God, but they both turned from the light and chose to follow the dark trail in life. Jesus instructs us to teach his commandments to others, but He also warns us that His teachings will not always be accepted (**Matthew 13:16-17**). Joe was hanged in Comanche by a vigilante group a few years ago in 1874. His brother, Wesley, hightailed it out of the area to save his neck. I doubted that these three no-goods really ran with Wesley's gang. I believe it was just an effort to intimidate that they referred to themselves as members of the Hardin gang.

As the five of us talked with one another, Jake kept asking me personal questions. "How much are you paid? What are your churches like? What kind of money do your people have?" I knew these questions were designed to see if I was worthy of their attention at some future date. I didn't give them specific answers, as I hoped they

would forget they had met me. As I always say, "Learn from the little nips before they become big bites." The three boys, feeling the alcohol, were beginning to drift off. Willie and I prepared to leave. Jake Colter took time to give me one last glare, so I said, "Jake, there are vigilante groups in the area that do not like gang members. You should quit the gang and find respectable work. It also would be good for you to go to church. You need God's guidance to turn your life around. I hope to see you there. But hear this warning... you and your boys should not follow me or bother me in any way on the trail. There will be consequences if you do."

They should have listened to me.

As Willie and I continued the journey, Willie said his goodbyes. "I've heard your sermons before, and I don't want to sit through them again." I told him that I change them up so I am not always saying things in the same way. Willie was itching to find some scalps, so he said his goodbyes. "Let me warn you before I go," he said, "I know those three boys back there pretty well, and I don't think they plan to leave you alone." I appreciated his warning and told him I felt the same way and that I would be on the lookout.

As I neared Breckenridge, I began to think of its people. Being on the edge of civilization for many years, the people in Breckenridge are hardened settlers. They have dealt with many hardships such as Indian raids, bandits, wild animal attacks, harsh weather conditions and lack of food and sometimes water. Many of the people in this area have accepted Jesus Christ as their savior, but I fear that the harsh conditions of life have hardened some hearts to living according to Jesus' commands. I look for the fruits of the Spirit in this community, and it is hard to find ample amounts of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

For the people of Breckenridge, in continuing the sermons on the story of salvation, I have decided to emphasize the concept of "sanctification" which is working toward the perfection of our love for God and our neighbors. This sanctification is evidenced by the actions that people take as devoted Christians toward honoring God's ordinances and loving their neighbors. I want these people to understand that believing in Christ is more than knowing Jesus is the son of God – it is about forging a sincere, authentic, loving, personal relationship with Christ.

I arrived in Breckenridge that evening in a dead-tired state. I stayed with the Williams family. Joseph and Mary Williams (yes, I said Joseph and Mary) are one of the most loving and generous couples I have met on this circuit. Josiah, their oldest son, was anxious to give Rahab the love and attention that she deserved. I must admit I saw love in Rahab's eyes as she was led to their barn for some delicious oats and a rubdown. After supper, it was time to get down to business. The adults always want to hear news of the world, but the kids want entertaining stories. The Williams' six children: Josiah, Abigail, Phoebe, Michael, Jonathan, and Jubilee are always anxious to hear stories before bedtime. Storytelling is one of my favorite activities when I spend the night with families on the trail. I told them the story of a prince in a faraway kingdom who

fought dragons, ogres, and evil wizards to save the princess whom he loved. After that story was over, I told them another story of love. The most amazing and important story of love – God’s love for all of us. This time, I told them the story of Noah and the flood. Most of the children were asleep before I could finish. Maybe next time I will tell them the best story first.

The Camp Meeting the next day was held at the community church building. This building is available for all denominations on any day except Sundays. Since they provided most of the money for the building, the Baptists have claimed Sundays for their worship services. This is fine with me as it is impossible for me to be at each of my stops on Sundays anyway. After everyone gathered on this Tuesday morning in the Sanctuary of the church, we talked of community concerns, prayed, sang, performed four baptisms, held a communion service and broke for lunch. The food was delicious and plentiful as always. The ladies of the church introduced me to several girls they thought might be appropriate for me to woo and possibly marry one day. I thanked them for the introductions but thought to myself, “Maybe someday, but not now.” It was time to gather again in the Sanctuary and begin the sermon - which in this case was going to be several hours long. I prefer to give shorter sermons as I know that human attention spans are challenged after about 30 minutes; but because I only come through about once a month, it is necessary to give several sermons at one sitting.

I stood at the pulpit, took a sip of cool water, prayed to the Holy Spirit to speak to us and began, “Brothers and sisters, last time I was here we talked about God’s redemptive plan for salvation. We all are sinners and in doing so, we separate ourselves from God. Jesus, Son of God, came to Earth to bring us truth and show us how to live a holy life. For us, He stands at the door of hearts and knocks. Many of you have allowed Him into your hearts and accepted His sacrifice to atone for your sins and reunite you with God for eternity. You promised to love and follow Jesus the rest of your life here on Earth. It is now time to talk of how God expects us to grow in His love after we have accepted His gift of Salvation.”

#4 In salvation, we are forgiven and made new (2 Corinthians 5:17)

The Holy Spirit placed it in my heart to let the folks know that we cannot claim to be Christian and not change the way we live. “We are not the same people we used to be. After our decision to follow Christ and be with God for eternity, we were made new. Paul tells us, *‘Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new’* (2 Corinthians 5:17).

You see, Brothers and Sisters, we must not go back to our old ways. Our old lives were leading us to an eternity of suffering and sorrow. We now live to please God and not ourselves. As Paul tells us, *‘And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may discern what is will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.’* (Romans 12:2).

#5 We continue to grow in God's love (2 Peter 3:18)

In accepting Jesus Christ as our savior, we not only are made new, but we are challenged to grow into perfection in love. The final words of Peter were, *'But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and forever'* (2 Peter 3:18). The key word here is 'grow.' None of us begin our Christian journey as mature, knowledgeable Christians. We are all new learners. We grow in Christ through prayer, Bible study, and support from Christian brothers and sisters. Paul tells us that the way we live honors and pleases the Lord; and as we continue to do kind things for others, we get to know God better and better. (Colossians 1:10)."

I could tell by their faces, that they were absorbing what I had to say and contemplating what this means for their lives. I know that it is time to put a little fear of God into them. I took another sip of cool water, and spoke the plain truth, "I tell you now that we fully believe that our names are now written into the Book of Life. When we face God on Judgment Day, we can approach God with assurance and joy that eternal life is ours because of Jesus.

#6 We believe we will have eternal life in heaven (Romans 6:23)

Paul tells us that Jesus is the reason for our salvation, *'For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord'* (Romans 6:23). Yes, eternal salvation is a free gift from God through Jesus Christ's sacrifice. However, let me warn you, it is possible to lose salvation. One can walk so far away from God that one gives up the salvation they once believed in. James, Jesus' brother, tells us that we must not be false Christians. If we falsely claim our faith in Jesus, He will tell us on judgment day, 'I never knew you' (Matthew 7:21-23). What a crushing blow that would be, my friends. If Jesus doesn't recognize us as believers, we will join the unbelievers in facing the wrath of God. Jesus said, *'He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him'* (John 3:36).

So I challenge you to examine your hearts today. Do you truly follow Christ? If you truly do, you are willing to follow His commands. As Jesus said, *'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.'* (Matthew 22:36-40). I beg you, Brothers and Sisters, don't let your faith die. Remember that James told us that faith without works is dead (James 2:26). James wanted us to know that we can think we have faith, but in reality it is dead because we refuse to truly follow Christ's commands." Don't be the one to whom Jesus says, "I never knew you."

I concluded the sermon with this, "Brothers and sisters, I want you to experience the Fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). I want you to be blessed with these

Fruits of the Spirit, but you cannot have them unless you are walking with the Holy Spirit. And you cannot walk with the Holy Spirit without accepting the gift of salvation that Jesus gifted you. You see, if I were to pull you out of the river and save you from drowning, you would be grateful because I gave your life back to you for another 20-30 years here on Earth. Jesus saved your life for an eternity – forever and ever! We should be grateful from the very bottom of our hearts – grateful enough to hand our lives over to Jesus and live the way He instructed us to live! All glory to our gracious and loving God, our savior Jesus Christ, and our guide and counselor the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

The service concluded with more singing and prayers. The congregants shared their joys and concerns, and more prayers were said. Generous amounts of food and fellowship followed. The members of the congregation asked for news from the world and the kids wanted their storyteller. I gladly filled them with news from Texas, the country, and the world; and I talked about sermon topics and church activities to come in the next few months. We talked late into the evening and continued to eat ourselves into a stupor.

After spending another night in Breckenridge, this time with the Johnson family, it was time to pack up Rahab and get on the trail to Comanche. From Breckenridge, it is a 3-day ride on the trail to get to the town of Comanche. I have several small communities to visit in Eastland County on the way. No churches have yet been started as the population is so sparse and widespread. The community of Comanche has been in existence since before 1858. The town was recently incorporated in 1873. The people of Comanche are good, hard-working Christians; but like those in Breckenridge, they have lived a hard existence on the fringes of civilization. Indian attacks, thieving varmints, wild animals, and harsh weather conditions are a constant plague to their existence.

Rahab took a slow walking pace along the trail which gave me plenty of time to think of things. I took some time to contemplate my personal prayer life. I preach constantly on the importance of prayer, yet my personal prayer life is not as it should be. It seems I am usually trying to solve all problems by myself without calling to God for help. I suppose I was raised to be self-reliant and self-sufficient. I know that Paul tells us to pray and pray and pray, *“Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:6-7)*. Paul also tells us to pray without ceasing, *“pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thessalonians 5:17-18)*. Perhaps this is the missing link in my prayer life. I do not constantly talk to God as though He were my best friend riding along with me on this Christian journey.

In my prayerful state, I am suddenly facing the three yahoos I met earlier on the trail. All three are blocking the trail; and due to the heavy brush, I don’t notice them until I am right on top of them. Jake had his pistol in his hand pointed right at me as he said, “I told you we always get what we want.” Jake was expecting me to answer him, but

Rahab and I took him by surprise by immediately springing into action. I have taught Rahab several maneuvers to get us out of trouble. One of these maneuvers is to rush the nearest horse on the words "Get 'Em!" That is exactly what we did. Rahab immediately rushed Jake's horse on my command. Rahab leaped forward and broadsided Jake's horse. Jake fell to the ground while the other two pulled their pistols. I, too, pulled my pistol and fired multiple times. When the smoke cleared, Jake was shot through the hand, Boyd was shot through the shoulder, and Sam through the hip. Not bad shooting on my part as I didn't aim to kill. All three boys were whimpering and holding their wounds. In my youth, Marshal Sid Newton from Dublin taught me to hit a six-inch circle within 30 feet nine out of ten times. This time, accurate shooting surely benefited these scoundrels.

I dismounted and went to dress their wounds. Thankfully no major arteries or veins were hit. Ironically, I used the whiskey they wanted to steal to sterilize their wounds before wrapping them up in bandages. As we were only a few miles from Comanche, I told them they were on their own. They could either go back to Comanche for medical attention, or they could continue to run from whomever was after them.

I took their gun belts and rifles. I told them that I would leave the belts and pistols further down the trail, but I would keep the rifles to turn into the marshal at Comanche. I didn't want to feel a bullet in my back from long range. Boyd and Sam seemed to be remorseful for their actions, but Jake had a look of vengeance in his eyes.

Once in Comanche, I visited the town marshal. I gave him the rifles and related the story on the trail and admitted to shooting the three boys. He was familiar with the three boys and said they were currently on the run after rustling and selling stolen cattle. This is a hanging offense, so I doubt they will poke their heads back in Comanche for a good while. In fact, the marshal said, "If you had killed them or brought them in, you would have received a \$100 reward."

That evening I joined in a camp meeting being held at the schoolhouse next to the downtown square. The Baptist preacher presided over the service, and I helped with prayers, communion, and baptisms. Afterwards, I had an opportunity to fellowship with my "Methodist people" and share news with them and hear about their joys and concerns. I get to visit Comanche much more than my other charges because of the close proximity of only 20 miles away from my home base, Dublin. I slept in the Baptist Church that night with Rahab not far away in a nice, cozy stable. I rewarded her heavily for saving me from the three would-be killers on the trail. She received a bath, a rub down, new shoes, and all the good oats mixed with a little molasses that she could eat.

The next morning, I was anxious to hit the trail as it had been over a month since I had seen my parents in Dublin. Rahab knew we were close to home also. She was anxious to see her friends on my father's ranch. I believe that she was a little sweet on a mule there named Buster. Dublin is my home. I have lived there all of my life. My mother and father moved from Arkansas to find a better life on their own stretch of land. My father makes a good living raising peanuts, sorghum, and various vegetables. He also

raises all kinds of livestock: horses, mules, cattle, sheep, pigs, chickens, ducks, and anything else that wanders onto the place. All of these assets make my father's ranch a pleasing target for thieves of all kinds, two-legged and four-legged. It was a constant struggle for me and my father to keep what was ours. It is a hard life, but a satisfying one.

Dublin was founded in 1855 and the town received a stagecoach station and a post office in 1874. The settlers had their share of hardships from marauding Indians and bandits. The settlers learned quickly to always keep a gun within reach while working in the fields, and to be ready to head for protective cover at any moment. A system of bells was worked out to warn the community people that trouble was on the way. When people heard the bells, they would yell "double-in" meaning get to safety on the double – hence the name of Dublin was born.

After taking care of Rahab, I greet my parents and catch up on news and tell them of my tales deep into the evening. My mother is horrified at my tale of woe with the three thieves. She urges me to quit the circuit and settle down in a church in one town. It is always a possibility that I could be given a full or part-time charge in one town, but it is unlikely for the moment. I am too successful at this circuit riding, and I am not sure there is a line of people waiting to take my place as it is a dangerous assignment. I am reminded of the words of Francis Asbury, a Methodist bishop and circuit rider, that he gave to his fellow circuit rider preachers, "We must reach every section of America – especially the raw frontiers. We must not be afraid of men, devils, wild animals, or disease. Our motto must always be, *Forward!*"

My mother feeds me until I am ready to pop. I know that I will need to work off this food with some heavy chores before the fat has a chance to set up permanently on my waist. My father took me aside and warned me, "Son, Dirk Briggs has said to more than one person here that he tends to get revenge on you for something you have done. I cannot imagine what it was you did to him to get him so angry." I looked at my father and sheepishly admitted, "It is not something I did to him but to his daughter Sarah." My father dropped the questioning but told me he knew I would take care of it whatever it happened to be.

After some hot chocolate and another piece of apple pie, I kissed my mother and Rahab (in that order) and said my goodnights. My bed never felt so good.

The next day, I received a communication from the Methodist Conference regarding my assignment for next year. The assignments are always made in June or July of every year, and the assignments last for one year only. My assignment was to keep the same circuit as this year with the mandate to travel to Taylor County, about 100 miles west of Dublin, to see if there is a viable need for a church in a new community called Buffalo Gap. This community of Buffalo Gap is primarily populated with buffalo hunters and cattle ranchers. There is talk in Buffalo Gap that there is a new community forming close by which will most likely be named Abilene.

Regardless of what name it will be called, it has a reputation of being a wide-open rough-and-tumble frontier town with cowboys, gunslingers, and saloons and brothels by the dozens. I cannot say that I have visited a community like this before. I decided that I will travel to this area as soon as I can wire my friend, Texas Ranger Robert Maloney, to accompany me on this journey to the even wilder west than I have already experienced.

I decided to spend the day with the pastor of the Methodist Church in Dublin. I do not have a formal charge of service in Dublin from the Conference, but I am allowed to assist the local preacher, Reverend Maurice Pendleton, in any way he needs help. On my way to the Methodist Church, I came face-to-face with Dirk Briggs. Both of us were on horseback, and Dirk said to me, "I should kill you for what you did to my daughter. You broke her heart." I looked at Mr. Briggs and said, "I am sorry you feel that way, Mr. Briggs. I care about your daughter, but I am not sure that I love her. Because of my circuit riding calling from God, I cannot even think about getting married to anyone right now."

I have often thought to myself that the life of a circuit rider's spouse cannot possibly be an easy one – especially a life like the kind I lead. I spend almost every day on the trail braving all kinds of dangers and hardships. The wilderness trail is no place for a female who wants to settle down and start a family. That is what Sarah wants, but I cannot be the one with whom she starts a family. Not now anyway, and I cannot ask her to wait on me. "I am sorry that Sarah is hurt, Mr. Briggs. I hope that she will find someone else who is willing to make a commitment and start a family with her. I know that is what she wants."

Dirk was seething as he spit out the words, "I don't care how you feel. You hurt my daughter, you coward!" He looked as if he was reaching for his pistol. I leveled my rifle across my lap to point directly at him. "Mr. Briggs, please don't do something we will all be sorry about. I can't possibly miss from this distance." I could feel the anger rising up my spine, down my arm, and into my finger. How dare him try to threaten me and run my life like he runs Sarah's. He spends most of his time drunk and abusing his wife and daughters. I doubt he cares for anyone other than himself. I watched Dirk as he dropped his eyes and his hand to his side. He silently led his horse away from me and headed down the road – probably toward the saloon. I am suddenly flushed with shame as I realize I could have easily killed him over what really amounted to nothing. I don't think Sarah really loves me anyway. She is just looking for someone to get her away from her father.

I decided then and there to not procrastinate and wire my Texas Ranger friend to see if he will accompany me to Taylor County to check out the need for churches in several communities there. I needed to get away for a while from these too familiar surroundings. My wanderlust is getting a hold of me, and I for sure need to get away from Dirk Briggs. Like I said earlier, I will not let someone easily kill me and keep me from serving my calling from God. Little did I know that I would come closer than I ever

have to seeing God face-to-face on my next trip...the trip to that ungodly place known as Abilene.

Matt Stephen

Dec. 2023