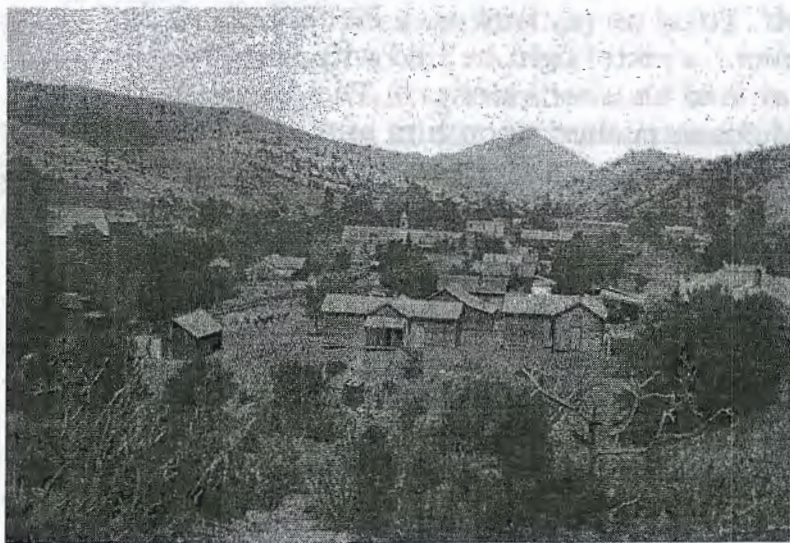


The English Work of the MEC in Hillsboro, Lake Valley, & Kingston

By Rev. Willard Steinsiek, 2008



Kingston 1900, courtesy of the Black Range Lodge

In the late 1800's the mining camps in the black range of southern New Mexico were wild places where you might have run into the likes of Butch Cassidy, Sundance Kid and Black Jack Ketchum, known visitors to Kingston. On Virtue Street in Kingston, rather than a church, you would find the brothel. The nearby communities of Hillsboro and Lake Valley were hardly more civilized.

Hillsboro, New Mexico, began as a mining community in 1877, after the discovery of gold in the area. Thomas Harwood noted that he first preached in Hillsboro in 1878, when it would have been little more than a tent city. By 1880 the town "had four salons, four grocery stores, and a post office." That year Thomas Harwood was said to have preached on Thanksgiving Day in one of the saloons, "which had been

placed at his disposal for the time being".

Daly, later called Lake Valley for the dry lake beds nearby, was the site of a remarkable discovery in 1878. Discovered by a blacksmith named John Leavitt, it was called the Bridal Chamber - a hollow in the hillside with walls of solid silver so pure that it was shipped directly to the Denver mint without the need of any processing. It was a find worth well over 2.75 million dollars. Within a few years the population of Lake Valley grew to 4000.

Kingston was originally called Percha City after a creek nearby where silver was found in 1882. The town quickly grew from 1800 people in 1882 to over 7000 as mines opened up in the hills. One of those mines, the Iron King, gave the town its new name. Of Kingston it is said that by the time the first church was built, the ratio was one church to 22 saloons.

Hillsboro is first listed as "to be supplied" along with "Daly" at the 1882 Conference of the NM Mission. It remained so until the appointment of J A Hardenbrook in 1884. At that time they described it as a "new and hard work in the midst of the mining country." Of J A Hardenbrook they noted, "He is doing a good work. Shows a good deal of energy in walking, much of the time to his appointments, a distance frequently of twelve and twenty miles." He stayed until 1885, serving Hillsborough, Lake Valley and Kingston.

The area was left without a Methodist preacher for a year, and the following year the report noted, "This is an important circuit... Kingston has, during the year, enjoyed a great boom in silver mining, over \$300,000 dollars having been taken from one mine within six months. It has a present population of about 1200, Hillsboro 200 and Lake Valley 250, and not a preacher of the gospel living in the country. We have a man for the place ready to go at once."

That man was N W Chase, who was appointed to Kingston late in 1886, where a small Sunday School of about 45 students had already been created. Without a building "Brother Chase had to preach in a lodgeroom, or schoolroom as opportunity afforded. Among the people there was little observance of the Sabbath, or regard for religion. For months brother and sister Chase toiled on, amidst such discouragements as seemed to make success impossible. At last faith in God won the victory. A church was organized with 12 members; a congregation, often of 100 people, crowded the schoolroom, numbers failing to gain admittance. A good Sunday School has been organized, and now arrangements are being made to build a church. Brother Chase also preaches at Hillsboro, and Lake Valley, the former twelve, and the latter thirty miles from Kingston."

By the following year a 30ft x 50ft building of stone was under construction at Kingston. They noted that it would be the first such stone building in the town.

One legendary story is that Sarah Jane Orchard, known as Sadie to her patrons, who ran a brothel in Kingston, sent her girls out to the saloons to collect money, raising \$1500 to build the first church in Kingston. "The structure went up and the opening services were held. Sadie and her 'soiled doves' attended but were promptly snubbed by proper citizens. She never again entered the church." (It seems likely that this was the Methodist Episcopal Church, but the evidence is inconclusive.) Always a colorful character in the area, Sadie later moved to Hillsboro and married the owner of the Stage Coach. She soon became the only known female stage coach driver in New Mexico history.

During the construction of the church in the spring of 1889, Rev. Chase was injured and laid up for weeks. Still by September of 1889, with the

church partially finished, worship was taking place at "an imposing stone church" on the main street of Kingston. The number of full members was 15, but with 125 enrolled in the Sunday School program. "The work has been slow, and at times, it seemed as if the gospel seed was doomed to rot in the soil at Kingston, but of late, it has been springing up." So wrote Rev. T L Wiltsee in his report. He also noted that the community was experiencing a "season of depression" economically in 1889.

In truth, there was now more silver being mined throughout the west than was needed. Help came in the form of the Sherman Silver Purchase act which was passed by Congress 1890. It required the government to purchase more silver with notes that could be redeemed for either silver or gold. Within 3 years, however, this policy was to have dire consequences.

Meanwhile, in addition to his injury, Rev Chase also faced a mounting personal debt, incurred in the process of building the church. This caused him to locate to Kingston for part of the year while giving the work up to Charles V Owen. Some complaints soon arose against Charles Owen, which led to an investigation. Upon closer examination they discovered that Charles Owen lacked the proper credentials to be a pastor, and may not have ever been a member of the Methodist church. He was quickly dismissed.

N W Chase, who had remained in the area, essentially continued his work, laying the groundwork for a church at Hillsboro as well. Having taken care of his indebtedness, N W Chase was then moved to Las Cruces, leaving the work in the hills to be supplied one more. In his report Harwood noted that Hillsboro was now the County Seat and a growing town. It was time for a church to be built there.

It is Rev. Henry Carlson who is appointed next to the Kingston/Hillsboro Charge. At Hillsboro he

preached a sermon on "A Temple of Worship for the Lord." As later reported, "the people were moved to undertake a new church. Although the new church is plainly the outgrowth of this inspired Methodist sermon, by one of those uncontrollable tides which arise in the affairs of new communities, the enterprise got upon a union basis. The building is advancing to completion...but it remains to be seen how far it will be conducive to the ultimate strength of Christianity in that charge."

So the hoped for Methodist Church became The Union Church at Hillsboro. It was outfitted with opera house chairs of metal and wood, with a hat rack under each chair, and a chandelier with space for 12 oil lamps to be individually filled and lit. Thomas Harwood, himself, dedicated the Union Church building in May of 1893. The building still stands in 2008 and still serves as the community church.

Meanwhile, the school at Kingston, which had been using the stone church building, moved out into their own building in 1893. This required that the church be "reseated." That was done and the church was dedicated.

In 1893, however, trouble in the railroad industry led to a national economic downturn, which caused many to demand gold in exchange for their gold and silver certificates. This run on the banks caused foreign investors to also demand payment in gold, weakening the US Gold reserve, and dropping the value of the dollar. 15000 companies and 500 Banks failed. The Sherman Silver Act was quickly repealed, and the value of silver plummeted. Silver mines all over the west were closed, some never to be opened again.

The three mining communities were hit hard as mines closed and people moved away. Lake Valley was further disheartened by a fire that destroyed the main street in 1895.

Officially, both Kingston and Hillsboro were left to be supplied from 1893 to 1896, with supply pastors such as F M Day and J E Kilpatrick filling the pulpit. The latter is mentioned in the report in 1896 as having "served this charge for the past year with great acceptability. When he took charge of this work he found but little of the spirit of Methodism there. A sort of go-as-you-please spirit prevailed. Out of this Brother Kilpatrick soon organized a good working church." Mention is also made, however, of the many removals taking place, a sure sign of decline in the community.

The following year would note J E Kilpatrick, who had evidently been in ill health all along, now took a turn for the worse. Leaving the area to return home to Michigan in March of 1897, he finally passed away there a few months later.

Replacing him was Rev. J A Mussell, a pastor from the Canadian Methodist Church. By 1899, however, the report talked about the "empty houses and deserted streets and idle machinery" of Kingston and Hillsboro. In the midst of such an economic downturn the charge was left to be supplied for the following year.

A local preacher, Henry Valkenburgh answered the call and by 1900 saw some success, showing an actual increase in membership, and the purchase of a parsonage for the charge, which had been the former home built by J A Mussell.

Another young local pastor H E Parker was secured to come for the next year but was late arriving. By 1901, the report was bleak. "At Kingston, almost the whole church and town are gone; one member in the town remains. The property is kept in good condition for the board of church extension, but it seems no longer possible to keep up regular services period. What can be done remains to be seen, but the outlook

is not encouraging. Really all that there is left of the circuit is at Hillsboro, where regular services are maintained, but under difficulties and discouragements."

Hillsboro was left to be supplied and was filled part of the next year by A L Day. Soon he left also, however, to return to Kansas with his wife.

The following year, 2 more pastors filled in, H B Hammond, and J G Rouff. The Circuit was left empty, however, for more than half the year, and as they noted had "been embarrassed by many removals."

By 1904, the report notes that someone was sent up for a day or two every quarter, but that otherwise the circuit was left unfilled. "We still hold the property at Las Cruces and Kingston" he notes, "but have neither members nor service at either place."

In 1905 the report notes that the inhabitants of Kingston, Hillsboro and Lake Valley combined would now "only make a small village." The boom and bust cycle of mining and economic change had left few people to be served. Still, once a quarter, someone came to preach in the circuit. "We still hold our interest in the Union Church building in Hillsboro," he wrote, "and continue to own the stone building in Kingston, but have services at long intervals in Hillsboro and Lake Valley only." They pondered abandoning the field, but argued that "to abandon the faithful few because they are few seems hardly in accordance with the spirit and genius of Methodism." The number of full members on the roll for the circuit was now 8.

Hillsboro was then attached to a circuit out of Silver City.

In 1908 the pastor of Silver City, J M Jackson was appointed to look after the property interests in Kingston and Hillsboro, "they being without active work at the present time."

A final mention of Hillsboro in 1912 notes that it has been "almost depopulated of English speaking people and notwithstanding the faithful work by C H Boddington [who had just arrived] I am of the opinion that this field must be temporarily abandoned."

It should be noted, however, that this is just the report of the English Mission, and that the Spanish work in the area continued separately, with Hillsboro becoming part of the Spanish District at the formation of the combined NM Conference in 1915.

One interesting side note from the Spanish work concerns Cristobal Salazar, who became a preacher in 1884. In 1887 while at Kingston, Thomas Harwood listened to some of the Americans there saying that they didn't think that Salazar was doing much at Hillsboro. With this in mind, Harwood thought that perhaps he should simply recommend his discontinuance. Later when the stage stopped for breakfast at Hillsboro, he went to Salazar's house to talk to him. He found the family saying their morning prayers, and later wrote, "His prayer saved them." "The thought came to me, 'Perhaps this is the only family in Hillsboro where they have family worship.'" Salazar was 58 years old when he passed away at Hillsboro in 1889.

In spite of fire and flood and the transfer of the County Seat to Hot Springs (Truth or Consequences) in 1936, the community of Hillsboro never became a ghost town. Perhaps some 150 residents still call it home today.

The post office in Kingston closed in 1957, but the Black Range Lodge, part of which dates to 1880, still serves guests, and there are perhaps 35 people still living in the community.

Lake Valley, the former stage stop, with "12 saloons, three churches, two newspapers, a school, stores, hotels, stamp mills and smelters" closed their

post office in 1954 and the last resident left town in 1994.

The history of the Methodist Church in such mining communities demonstrates the boldness with which these early pioneer preachers approached their task. They entered early into what was often an unfriendly environment for a church. Where there was no soil worth tilling, they labored to create it. They preached, taught, made disciples and became part of the community, finally building a church where and when they could.

The record also shows how reluctant they were to leave any field of ministry once attained, even when the community could no longer support a pastor. In those days, the Methodist Church came quickly and left slowly, so as to be sure that they had left no soul behind.

Those who labored in such places did not always see grand results, but history has a long view of such things. The people whose lives they touched in these mining camps eventually moved on to other places, leaving behind an empty building, but when they left they took their new faith with them. Later, when they settled again, they became a part of the church in some other community. So the effort of these pioneer preachers and church members was never really lost. It simply moved to another place, and no doubt, even today, we still owe much to their prayers and their faithful service.

When the old stone church at Kingston was torn down, a letter was removed from the cornerstone. It is from N W Chase, dated August 12, 1888. It reads in part;

"...Since we have been requested to make a regular deposit in the archives of this Earthly Temple which is to be dedicated to Almighty God; the deposit is not of a metallic substance which will cor-

rode and waste away amid the ravages of time, but we deposit thoughts, facts, and truths, which we put in their dark hiding place, there to remain until in the coming centuries, others shall open the long deposited casket, then will they come in contact with our thoughts, feelings, and hopes, which will influence them, and they in turn will influence others and so on through time into eternity. In view of the fact that we are traveling to that unseen country from whose bourn no traveler ever returns, may we build for ourselves such character that when time shall be no more we shall have a building of God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens."

Amen.

Resources

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