# GOD-SEEKERS AMONG THE GOLD-SEEKERS:
## Ministers in the Mining Camps

DUANE A. SMITH

Learning that her family was moving, a worried young girl closed her evening prayers with "Goodbye God, I'm going to Bodie." The story may be apocryphal, but it reinforces the legend of the mining camps' attitude toward religion. This concerned Victorian was convinced that she was headed for a place where God apparently held no sway and had even given up trying to reform this Sodom and Gomorrah.

She need not have fretted, because few mining communities, if any, were not at one time recipients of a ministerial visit and/or the site of a Sunday school. Indeed many had churches and active congregations, the foundation for religious activities. God had not forsaken the mining camp; neither had his ministers nor his people.

Perhaps because it does not fit the stereotype of the "rough and ready" camp, the church's role has been diminished. Although it cannot be denied that the western mining camp had its rough edges, it was never so godless as legend would have it. Along with the saloons, red-light districts, and rush for riches came people to make the camps permanent communities. Among them were those who rallied to the church's call when a minister arrived. They wanted to make their camp one in which families could settle, which possessed Victorian refinements and offered the appearance of stability and permanence. The church—the actual building with its traditional steeple and bell—was a major step in that direction.

Thus, our young friend who went to Bodie—or Caribou, Silver Reef, Butte, Gold Hill, or White Oaks—need not have feared. She was not being abandoned to a godless world. Wherever she went she would find persons with similar interests and together they would provide the nucleus for Christian fellowship, so vital to their lives.

In the brassy, acquisitive life of the western mining camp, the church and its ministers upheld the spiritual values that were not forgotten, just frequently ignored, in the scramble for worldly goods. The hedonistic environment affected all who came in touch with it, even those who had a sound Christian upbringing. Thirty-year-old George Cocking, a Cornishman, who arrived in Central City, Colorado in the 1880's testified to its persuasion. At first he went to church, even presenting a certificate of membership he had brought

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from England. After a few weeks, however, he grew indifferent to his religious duties:

> I know not how to account for this unless it was the tide of worldliness which swept over my soul in the search for wealth. As I view it now, I think God was gracious in not granting my worldly desires: for, had riches increased, I might have neglected his Word altogether.[1]

Like his contemporaries, he had caught "gold fever"; unlike most others, he turned to the ministry after mining unsuccessfully at Central City and Aspen.

Others testified to the same conditions. The editor of Ruby City, Idaho's *Owyhee Avalanche,* May 19, 1866, wrote, "There are a great many people who have been so long from 'god's country' that they have forgotten whether anybody died for them or not and act as if they did not care. They don't act as though they had any pious obligations and regard for Sunday." A famous Colorado Methodist minister, John Dyer, concluded that this unsettled condition was unfavorable to religious societies. His co-laborer, George Darley, wrote that the mountain towns had large numbers of men professing to hold views contrary to Christian religion; Darley found no region "so indifferent to religious influence" as a new mining camp. There were, he said, some Christians who believed the Lord did not see them after they crossed the Missouri River. Taking an overview of his district, Bishop George Randall sadly decided that "unbelief prevails among the multitudes."[2] In his opinion, the engrossing nature of their business and the absence of the restraining influence of home and former associations brought this about.

Not only ministers reached this conclusion. Mrs. Emily Meredith, living in Bannack, Montana, wrote: "If 'Labor is worship' this is a most worshipful community, but of any other kind of worship there is no public manifestation whatever. I verily believe that two-thirds of the people here are infidel." In a letter to a friend in 1850, George Read observed, "This is a very bad country for morals. I would counsel all young men and all others whose principles of religion, morals and temperance are not firmly fixed, not to think of coming to this country." A few years later, in Virginia City, Nevada, a local woman

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[1]George Cocking, *From the Mines to the Pulpit or Success Hammered Out of the Rock* (Cincinnati: Jennings & Pye, 1900), pp. 141-42.

[2]John L. Dyer, *The Snow-Shoe Itinerant* (Cincinnati: Cranston & Stowe, 1890), p. 335. George M. Darley, *Pioneering in the San Juan* (Chicago: Fleming H. Revell, 1899), p. 37 & 149. George M. Randall, *First Report of Bishop Randall of Colorado* (New York: Sanford, Harroun & Co., 1866), p. 21.

candidly stated that of those who went to church, many simply went to show off "their fine costumes."[3]

It was not that the mining community lacked intelligence or interest in religious things. Both Bishop Randall and a newspaperman-turned-miner, James Chisholm, thought the intelligence of the camps' inhabitants was above the average of older communities. Chisholm wrote about the miner's attitude toward religion: "He is a philosopher, or at least philosophizes. He moralizes too, and has generally laid out for himself one broad rule for guidance through this life to the next, which has no element of faith in it. Usually he is a skeptic."[4]

A perceptive woman in the California gold rush, Sarah Royce, analyzed the drive of the people around her. She agreed with Cocking that many sacrificed habits of morality or religious convictions to gold, and that others held their convictions too lightly and came to feel the force of unwonted excitement and the pressure of unexpected temptation too often. They yielded little by little until they found themselves standing "upon a very low plane," side by side with those whose society they once shunned. What was their justification? "It was very common to hear people who had started on this downward moral grade, deprecating the very acts they were committing, or the practices they were countenancing; and concluding their weak lament by saying, 'But *here*-in California we *have* to do such things.'"[5] And in Nevada, Idaho, or Colorado, this excuse could justify a multitude of sins.

Sarah Royce believed that never before had there been a better opportunity to demonstrate the power and truth of Christian principles than in the mining regions. There were those who kept the faith, like one forty-niner who wrote after being deathly sick for several days, "... but that God in whom I trust for life and health, interposed his almighty arm & spared my life & restored me to health again." Or Peter Cool, who met with a few friends in his California cabin to sing some hymns. And the first two Methodist ministers in the newly-opened Gregory diggings in July, 1859, found a large and attentive congregation who sang the old hymns and wept over personal short-

[3]Clyde McLemore (ed), "Bannack & Gallatin City in 1862-63: a Letter by Mrs. Emily R. Meredith," *Sources of Northwest History*, No. 24, p. 5. George W. Read, *A Pioneer of 1850* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1927), p. 109. M. M. Mathews, *Ten Years in Nevada or Life on the Pacific Coast* (Buffalo: Baker, Jones & Co., 1880), p. 195.

[4]Lola M. Homsher (ed.), *South Pass, 1868, James Chisholm's Journal of the Wyoming Gold Rush* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1960), p. 112. Randall, *First Report*, p. 21.

[5]Sarah Royce, *A Frontier Lady: Recollections of the Gold Rush and Early California* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1933), 109.

comings.[6] Looking back over his years of mining camp ministry, George Darley was moved to state that while "bold infidelity" might seem to reign, there were many more faithful than "some men like to have us believe."[7] On this foundation, the mining camp churches were built.

Ministers came to the camps for nearly as many reasons as there were workers in the field. Father Joseph Machebeuf was sent to Colorado by his bishop in Santa Fe and found that to reach his migratory congregation would require a mountain itinerary. Some were sent by the American Home Missionary Society, as was Lanson Norcross, who went into the Black Hills in 1876, where he secured the district's only organ for use in Sunday services.[8] Others came on their own, drawn by the lure of gold, or to save the souls of those who were. John Dyer walked to Colorado with a wagon train in 1861, then promptly swapped his watch for provisions and took off for the diggings. Thus early in the California and Colorado gold rushes services were being held; the same could be said for the other rushes. Once it became obvious that permanent settlement would materialize (and not infrequently before such evidence), the Methodists, Baptists, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, and other denominations hurried their men into the field. Time could not be wasted, a root had to be put down before the "temptations of satan" took hold.

Undoubtedly, few ministers were accorded the same send off or reception as Oscar Sensabaugh, who was sent to Durango, Colorado, following the Southern Methodist Annual Conference in Denver in 1881. The experience was still fresh in his mind years later when he wrote his autobiography. He had hunted up his presiding elder and asked where he had been sent. "Durango," was the reply. "Where is it?" After finding out it was 450 miles southwest, Sensabaugh inquired, "What is over there?" To which he received a rather startling reply: "That is what we are sending you to find out." Arriving in Durango, he enthusiastically set out to find prospective church members:

> After breakfast, I went down into the office and saw a well-dressed gray-haired man reading a paper. Apologizing I introduced myself as a Southern Methodist preacher sent to organize our church in that section. Looking up into my face with a puz-

[6]Peter Y. Cool Diary (August 12, 1851), Henry E. Huntington Library. S. Shufelt, *A Letter from a Gold Miner* (San Marino: Friends of Huntington Library, 1944), p. 18.
[7]Darley, *Pioneering*, p. 124.
[8]W. J. Howlett, *Life of the Right Reverend Joseph P. Machebeuf* (Denver: Register College of Journalism, 1954 reprint), pp. 295-96. Colin B. Goodykoontz, *Home Missions on the American Frontier* (Caldwell: Caxton Printers, 1939), p. 318.

> zled expression, he asked, 'What are they? Never heard of them.' I explained carefully in just as few words as possible. He listened and turning to me said, 'Better go back where you came from. I know this town and do not believe there are any here.'[9]

Sensabaugh persevered, as did most of the others, and with them came the church into the mining camp. There was nothing superhuman about them; they were ordinary men, and a very few women, who felt the call and answered it.

The minister needed to come to a mining camp with his ears, eyes, and mind wide open. Methods he used elsewhere might have to be discarded. It was vital that he realize this early or his entire mission might fail. Starting off on the wrong foot could seriously undermine his influence, particularly if he persisted with ineffective practices as if such steadfastness were a virtue.

The *Presbyterian Home Missions,* in October, 1882, tried to educate its readers as to just what type minister was needed. Physically, the writer pointed out, strong men were desirable, because the constant drain on their health wore out those in poorer condition. More than that, however, they must be strong mentally and truly consecrated to Jesus' service. Such paragons sounded fine in theory but proved hard to find in practice.

Bishop Ethelbert Talbot, after years of service on the Montana and Wyoming frontier, commented that the "successful" man of God in the mining camp need not lose his dignty or self-respect, but it "is of vital importance" that he be a man among men and meet men on their own ground. He must possess the capacity of loving and the qualities of good-fellowship, sympathy, and fraternity and be patient.[10] A study of a group of southwestern Colorado Methodist ministers who were classified as "effective" used these terms to describe them: "interesting speaker, active and earnest, a defender of the word, preacher of the full gospel and a man of wide culture." One might quibble over just what "defender of the word" or "full gospel" meant, but for the people of those mining camp pews, those terms were relevant.[11]

A lady writing to the Methodist Bishop in Denver spelled out what kind of minister she wanted in her community. "It is some one who is a first class speaker and a no. 1 man in every respect as no second class speaker or preacher will be successful." As if this were not enough, she further elaborated, "do send us an able man, good

[9]Oscar F. Sensabaugh, "Recollections," Iliff School of Theology, p. 2.

[10]Ethelbert Talbot, *My People of the Plains* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1906), pp. 55, 95-96.

[11]Isaac Beardsley, *Echoes from Peak and Plain* (Cincinnati: Jennings, 1898), pp. 435-529.

speaker, prayer, and singer which most all good Methodist ministers are and we will have the entitre support of the best people."[12] George Darley pointed out that one had to be willing to accept people, to preach anywhere, under almost all conditions, and to "tire and tire again" in God's work.

Though a successful minister meant different things to different people, certain common traits began to appear. He had to be able to adapt to a wide variety of individuals and be willing to meet them on their own level; he could take no one for granted from his or her appearance. He should be an "able" preacher, one who was neither a hide-bound conservative nor extremely liberal in his philosophy. With the primitive conditions of new mining communities, it was best that he be in sound health and, above all, dedicated to his calling. It also helped if he were a carpenter, fund raiser, organizer, and possessed a dozen other minor skills that would surely come in handy sometime. Such individuals did not abound, which makes those who measured up to the demands seem that much more remarkable and evokes a more sympathetic understanding for those who did not.

The afore-mentioned attributes made a big difference to the people who observed and listened to these ministers. George Parsons, in Tombstone, noted one Sunday in his diary that the sermon on the "power and goodness of God" had been good, but on another occasion confessed, "It is from politeness to my maker that I attend church at all here, where numbskulls and broken down ministers have charge of spirituality. I go to worship God and could well dispense with all but the singing and praying in which all can join."[13] Writing his mother from Montana in 1870, George Locke clearly showed his disgust, despite his original spelling and unconcern for puctuation:

> I am almost ashamed to say it I do not like preachers I have not meet but one good man and true Christian minister in these mountains so long as they can take up a collection of 50 or 60 dollars every time they preach if not they go away saying it will not pay to preach to you Some of them make large sums of money preaching others not making it pay turn gamblers or something worse They will not work to lazy. I have got to believe it is better to pray in the dark than in curch.[14]

A 49'er remembered his ministers somewhat differently; as a rule

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[12]Mrs. W. H. Watson to Bishop H. W. Warren, May 29, 1896, Methodist Episcopal Church Records, San Juan County Historical Society.

[13]George Parsons, *The Private Journal of George Whitwell Parsons* (Phoenix: Arizona Statewide Archival & Records Project, 1939), pp. 152 & 248.

[14]George A. Locke, "Letters," Bancroft Library.

they were truly faithful to the high trust of their calling. Another man of the same period, however, noticed a Methodist and Presbyterian preacher in a rather forlorn state; it turned out that they had preached without getting much monetary return. The layman concluded, "we find in the present age only a very few men who really teach the gospel for Christ's sake alone." A third Californian was chagrined when he heard a sermon from a Methodist "reverend gentleman" on the necessity of regeneration. The same gentleman was the owner of a drinking house on one of the back streets.[15]

Ministers of all types were found on every mining frontier. Unfortunately, the poor ones could seriously damage the efforts of their dedicated colleagues; fortunately, the latter prevailed, or the church's efforts might have floundered. The minister set the style, created the mood, and on his shoulders rested the major responsibility for the success of his local church.

The minister found his role delimited further by custom and practice. The present and future congregations, and local residents, measured him against standards which were usually biased and seldom the same as those of the church hierarchy. Their expectations were centered on two distinct concepts: the role of the preacher and the role of the pastor. The impact of the preacher, limited to his performance within the church, proved in some ways less significant, since attendance might be small and inconsistent. The pastor's role, outreach to the community, meant ministering both to the faithful and to the camp in general. Here important work could be done, the largest audience reached, and Christianity practiced in the work-a-day world, not simply discussed on Sunday morning or in evening prayer meeting.

A multitude of problems confronted the minister in either role. As the pastor and preacher, he was forced to come to grips with the fact that Sunday was not the Sabbath, the biblical Lord's day. In the mining camps, Sunday was wide-open, even better than "business as usual," since this was the day that most of the miners took off and came to town to shop and celebrate.

Daniel Woods, a church-goer himself, wrote that some used the day to improve themselves reading the Bible, but it had to be admitted that there was more gambling and drinking on that day than all other days of the week. Another 49'er, Joseph Wood, confessed that on one Sunday in September, 1849, he prospected on the Tuo-

[15]James Woods, *Recollections of Pioneer Work* (San Francisco: Winterburn & Co., 1878), p. 66. Friedrich Gerstaecker, *California Gold Mines* (Oakland: Biobooks, 1946), p. 89. Alonzo Delano, *Alonzo Delano's California Correspondence* (Sacramento: Book Collectors Club, 1952), p. 62.

lumne River and spent the rest of the day writing in his journal. The years passed, but Sundays did not change. George Smith, in Virginia City, Montana in the 1860s, observed that Sunday was the big day, with business and sin at their very worst. In the Gregory diggings (later Central City, Colorado), Libeus Barney attended a service with twenty others; the drinking and gambling crowd a few yards away numbered fifty. Mining in the Black Hills, Jerry Bryan commented in his diary that he had gone to a service but had a hard time concentrating, "No one seemed to pay any attention. Two auctions were going on at the same time."[16] The editor of the *Pinal Drill* (Pinal, Arizona), on February 26, 1881, felt obligated to point out that on the preceding Sunday the number of people at the race track outnumbered the worshipers about 12-to-1.

James Morley wrestled with his conscience over working on Sunday and finally won it over. "Thinking of wants of loved ones at home, it seems no sin, in this savage country [Montana] to exert oneself on their behalf on the Sabbath." Once he had rationalized it, he barreled ahead, even working on Christmas Day. "Improvement of time is the motto the sooner to get home to Missouri."[17]

Ministers could not be expected to approve Morley's rationalizations, but they had to come to understand them. Many of the men, particularly in a camp's early history, were there simply to make money and get out, hardly a life-style conducive to augmenting the church's fortunes. Not until some stability was achieved would this picture change and then only grudgingly, since Sunday was most miners' day off. They were not inclined to church-going and resented the church's interfering with their recreation. Churches took the offensive by promoting Sunday closing laws, first aimed just at saloons, then at business in general. What seemed to be a victory, the passage of a local law, did not always produce the desired results. Enforcement was the only answer, and city fathers found themselves between the frying pan and the fire on this issue. Ministers in Ouray, Colorado, as late as 1899, were still trying to get the Sunday closing law enforced, and they proudly reported an upswing in male attendance once the battle had been carried.

Having surveyed this Sunday dilemma, the minister then had to

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[16]Daniel Woods, *Sixteen Months at the Gold Diggings* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1851), p. 140. Joseph Wood Diaries, Henry E. Huntington Library, September 16, 1849. George Edwards, "Presbyterian Church History," *Contributions . . . Montana* (vol. 6, 1907), p. 298. Libeus Barney, *Letters of the Pike's Peak Gold Rush* (San Jose: Talisman Press, 1959), p. 73. Jerry Bryan, *An Illinois Gold Hunter in the Black Hills* (Springfield: Illinois State Historical Society, 1960), p. 32.

[17]James Morley, "Diary of James Henry Morley in Montana," 1862-65, Montana Historical Society, July 19 & Dec. 25, 1863.

find a place to hold services. At first any available space was appropriated. George Darley commented that a faro table made a most convenient pulpit, nor could a more respectful audience be found than that in a saloon-gambling hall. The neophytes were shocked, but Darley spoke from experience. Once in Idaho, Bishop Talbot used a camp's dance-hall, because it was the only place available, and in Virginia City, Montana, in 1865, Father Giorda served Christmas mass in a theater. A California minister remembered that he preached in school houses, halls, gambling saloons, drinking saloons, and theaters and officiated at funerals in houses of ill fame, without once witnessing any disturbances.[18]

All this was well and good; expediency went only so far, however. If the congregation were going to be permanent, a regular place had to be found. Some churches went no further than renting a room or hall, but this was the exception. What each group wanted was a building of its own—one for every little congregation in the camp. Though an unwise plan, it seemed to be necessary for every denomination's self esteem and, regrettably, denominationalism prevailed. Too few followed the advice of Joseph Pickett, who urged that it was foolish to attempt to sustain several small Protestant churches. They were only a continual drain on their national organization and weak, often impractical, within the camp.

Clarence Mayo grew extremely disgusted with the numerous churches in Gunnison, Colorado. Writing his father, he exploded, "It has got so you meet women on every corner begging for the churches, as far as I am concerned they can all go to *D* . . ." It was, he continued, "nonsense . . . to try to run so many gospel shops."[19] A few camps did agree to a community church, but far more chose denominationalism, with predictable results.

It took a confirmed realist, or a pessimist, to stand up and say that the camp's prospects did not warrant a church. Like a school and courthouse, a church gave the appearance of stability, the veneer of civilization that community boosters so desired. It did not matter to them that funds to maintain the institution were in short supply; the most important thing was to get the building up. Even people who would never darken a church's door or slouch into a pew could be counted on to contribute.

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[18]Darley, *Pioneering,* pp. 17-18. Talbot, *My People,* pp. 160-61. Francis Kuppens, "Christmas Day in Virginia City, Montana," *Montana* (Autumn, 1953), pp. 13-14. Woods, *Recollections,* p. 140.

[19]William Salter (ed.). *Memoirs of Joseph W. Pickett* (Burlington: Geo. Ellis, 1880), p. 99. Clarence Mayo to Father, No. 12, 1882, Clarence H. Mayo Letters, Henry E. Huntington Library.

As much work as possible was usually done by the membership, and here it helped if the minister were a combined carpenter-mason-painter and natural-born leader. Construction was soon begun, and the newspaper recorded progress in a week-by-week report. Obstacles almost always arose before the opening Sunday service.

James Woods noted that although all his people wanted to start, when efforts were actually made to organize a building committee, obtain subscriptions, and superintend the work, none could be found with time to spare. Money was plentiful, time precious. As a result, Woods took sole charge of everything. A Presbyterian minister touring the Colorado San Juans wrote home that "the object of many seemed to be just to get a church building here [Animas City] as an addition in building up a town, and now when I insist on membership first they have lost all interest."[20]

Once construction was completed, the church was ready for a proper opening service; visiting dignitaries and other local ministers sometimes joined the resident minister for the occasion. If the community was not too old, the local paper would cover it with a column or so; then the church would be on its own. Some of them never got this far. Daniel Tuttle recalled a minister who came to Virginia City, Montana, and, with "true Methodist enthusiasm and energy," set out to build a church. Tuttle had already backed away from a similar project in fear of debt, which in this case proved well-founded. When the building was seized by the sheriff for mechanics' liens, Tuttle passed a subscription book and purchased the property.[21]

Once on its own, the congregation found itself confronted for the first time wtih the nagging necessity of continued financing. If the church started in debt, as many did, the problem was only compounded by the month-to-month operating and salary expenses. Many sources were tapped, including some that were subject to general social ostracism. Gamblers, saloon keepers, and prostitutes had ready cash, perhaps more than most of their "good" neighbors. They were solicited for contributions repeatedly, if accounts can be believed. As an example, Joseph Pickett received $53 from gamblers to purchase a Sunday school library for his Silverton, Colorado congregation. Their money was sought but not their presence. George Parsons was spending an otherwise uneventful morning in church, when some "fair but frail" sisters walked in. He could not get over it and confided in his

[20]Woods, *Recollections,* pp. 24-25. *Rocky Mountain Presbyterian,* September, 1878, p. 1.

[21]Daniel Tuttle, *Reminiscences of a Missionary Bishop* (New York: Thomas Whittaker, 1906), pp. 178-79.

diary, "Plenty of loose women who left church for saloon. Don't see their object in attending church."[22]

More conventioinal methods of gathering funds were not overlooked. Securing pledges could be rough on those involved in the fund drive. George Parsons went out to collect money for the "minister's account" and was having splendid success until he

> Had a row with Elias Brown who stuck his name at the head for $2 and scratched his name giving him a piece of my mind. Heard he was a hypocrite and now I rather believe it. All on my list must pay or be denounced and scratched by me unless for good reason.[23]

Others with this attitude toward non-contributors probably reacted less honestly to their feelings. Collecting money could be a long day's work.

Various projects were undertaken to secure funds. Church fairs, bazaars, and dinners touched community-wide resources in a painless way, while providing social gatherings. Speakers—sometimes noted individuals, usually church leaders or local people—and concerts also raised a little revenue through ticket sales. Here the church functioned as a community center, a role for which it proved particularly well adapted in a mining camp's early days, a time when acceptable social outlets were few. Occasionally, a church would fall back on a lottery, a ploy that raised moral questions among members who felt it should not be involved in any form of gambling, despite desperate financial straits. Few ministers had to resort to Father Machebeuf's strategy at Central City. When insufficient funds were raised to build a Catholic church, he simply had the doors locked one Sunday after mass and announced that no one could leave until the question was settled. The money was forthcoming.[24]

For all such efforts, the minister had to survive on undependable collections and weak support even from his national church organization. Sensabaugh carried on the first months of his ministry, from November into March, on ten dollars, while subsisting on any work he could find and his small reserve funds. Though some people thought ministers should limit their work to church obligations, John Dyer argued emphatically the other way. He always felt the minister had the right to earn his living, if it could not be done by preaching alone; he himself turned to mining. Unfortunately, many parishioners

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[22]Parsons, *Private Journal,* p. 100.
[23]Parsons, *Private Journal,* p. 203.
[24]Howlett, *Machebeuf,* pp. 296-97.

agreed with the member who said, after installing his new minister, "My dear brother, if the Lord will only keep you humble we will keep you poor."[25]

An awareness of the foregoing implications helped the minister to strengthen his position in the mining community. In his role of preacher he also had to build his congregation and mobilize the laity into a unified church effort. The church week usually included two Sunday services, morning and evening, with Sunday school squeezed in between, and a mid-week prayer meeting. In addition to these responsibilities at the home church, many ministers preached on a circuit in nearby smaller mining communities on other days. It proved to be a continually trying job to encourage the flock, strengthen and revitalize lagging members, or do whatever was necessary to help them maintain the faith week after week in the materialistic mining world.

The biggest inducement to regular attendance was competent preaching. It was difficult for many to go to church on Sunday anyway, without having to sit through a poorly organized and/or delivered sermon. Isolation from fellow ministers and seminaries, where resources might have been found, made it hard to write sermons week after week. Daniel Tuttle complained that he felt alone without his books and had no hope of getting them because the freight rates were too high. Tuttle wrestled with himself over what and how to preach and admitted to having problems. "But when I came to the sermon, I tried to make it too impressive I think. I was thinking of myself too much, of God's truth and men's souls too little, and I don't believe I preached as I ought. I was cold and self-critical, and wanting to see the effect on the audience."[26] Tuttle received the grace to be humble, as he expressed it, and went on to a distinguished career.

George Darley proved adept at working local themes into his sermons:

> Sinner, whether you are a mining sinner or a prospecting sinner, do you wish to be 'staked' on this 'lode,' and have your name recorded in the Book that our Creator keeps, in which are written the names of all who are interested in it? If so, go to Christ: tell him you have thus far sought the gold and silver that perisheth with the using—the 'veins' of silver and gold—but now you desire an interest in the imperishable riches.

According to his register of sermons, he preached on "Christ's Love,"

[25]Darley, *Pioneering*, p. 142. Dyer, *Snow-Shoe*, p. 335. Sensabaugh, "Recollections," p. 5.

[26]Tuttle, *Reminiscences*, pp. 142-43, 169.

"Perfection," "Saved by Grace," and "The Mercy of God" to various San Juan congregations in 1877.[27] The minister could never afford to take his congregation's intellectual capacity for granted; the well-educated mingled with the uneducated on any given Sunday. This phenomenon did little to put the inexperienced preacher at ease. Mining engineer Eben Olcott put into words a prevalent attiude, when he wrote his sister that he was much disappointed in the minister last Sunday when he preached a sermon very much out of place.[28]

Even the best prepared and most adaptable minister had to be ready for almost any interruption of his services. One Sunday, while George Parsons was listening to a strict "orthodox hell" sermon, the minister asked, "How shall we escape these things?" An old drunk near him replied out loud that *he* didn't know. Tuttle recalled a member whose "singing in his pedal bass was a distress," but who insisted upon singing vociferously. When he gently mentioned on a Sunday that those not gifted for singing should leave it to others to sing "for us," the intended person failed to heed, while "two or three of the best sopranos" stopped singing. George Darley was interrupted by a dog and cat fight one evening during prayer service, and another time a large deer walked down the aisle. With his characteristic sense of humor, Darley wrote, "he turned round, walked out, and went back to the hills without waiting for collection or sermon."[29] And the editor of the *Pinal Drill* pointed out in consecutive issues, November 5 and 12, 1881, that the usual assortment of noisy babies, dogs, and a couple of cats had disturbed the services. It showed, he said, bad taste on the part of the animals' owners and raised the question of the propriety of bringing infants to a church service.

Looking out over a congregation staring up from the pews, the minister was much more likely to see a majority of women. Women formed the sturdy backbone of the mining camp church. They served on committees, prepared church suppers, made items for the bazaar, and undertook a multitude of unsung duties that kept the church afloat. Sarah Royce remembered that her sitting room had become the gathering place for the early worshipers in her neighborhood and soon a minister came to preach.[30] Many churches started from similar humble beginnings. The women built upon what was there, because

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[27]Darley, *Pioneering*, p. 115. George Darley, "Register of Sermons, 1876-77," Darley Family Collection, Western History Collections, University of Colorado.

[28]Eben Olcott to Sister, Feb. 6, 1881, Eben E. Olcott Collection, University of Wyoming.

[29]Parsons, *Private Journal*, p. 169. Tuttle, *Reminiscences*, p. 452. Darley, *Pioneering*, pp. 99-101.

[30]Royce, *Frontier Lady*, p. 138.

they sensed the spiritual and social need for the church and wanted a reminder of the homes they had left behind.

Very few women preachers appeared, but one in Virginia City, Nevada, attracted quite a congregation to her revivals. A Cornish miner listened to her sermon intently. Approaching this man afterward, she said, "Well my friend are you a laborer in the vineyard of the Lord?" "No mum, I be's a miner in the Savage lower level."[31]

The minister's wife was much more commonly encountered than the woman preacher. After the initial hardships of travel and settlement had been overcome, the wives arrived with their husbands in increasing numbers. They became major factors in the church's life, and could quickly find themselves overburdened. The *Ladies' Home Journal,* in 1892, reminded its readers: "Do not forget that she is a woman, and a wife, and a mother, before she is an assistant pastor. Do not forget that her time is not paid for." It was hard to be all these things; frontier conditions were no easier on her than anyone else. Many left a child buried in a local cemetery when their husbands were transferred or moved on. Despite the work and strain, the minister's wife helped in the total church mission and could reach elements of the community that her husband might not. Altogether, these dedicated women represented a vital force in the church's life. The Rev. James Gibbons observerd that practical woman suffrage was in wholesome operation in the camps longs before it was embodied in state legislation.[32]

Women were active in all aspects of the Sunday school program, which often served as the foundation for a full-fledged church. The *Rocky Mountain Presbyterian,* September, 1872, recommended that the superintendent be a man (nineteenth-century chauvinism!) of piety, sound judgment and dignity, be punctual and a Bible student, and possess unbounded enthusiasm. Such highly qualified men and women were hard to find, and the Sunday schools ran chronically short of teachers and superintendents. Even if a corporal's guard were found, human frailties might bring it down. One newspaper regretted to report that a game of "freeze out" among several teachers over who was to teach what sabotaged the local Sunday school. Far more common, fortunately, were comments in the press about successful programs and the good being rendered "the innocent minds of

[31]Gideon Hamilton to Dexter, June 6, 1877, Gideon Anthony Hamilton Collection, Henry E. Huntington Library.

[32]*Ladies' Home Journal* quoted in *Teller Topics* (Bachelor, Colorado), July 22, 1892. James Gibbons, *In the San Juan* (Chicago: Calumet Book & Engraving Co., 1898), p. 20.

children."[33] The energy and innocent young minds of children, then as now, could bedevil a teacher and make Sunday school a traumatic experience for the unprepared.

Although much of the minister's time was taken up by his preaching responsibilities, he dared not slight his pastor's role. In this role he benefited not only his flock but reached out to the entire community as well. Both were served by his services in weddings and funerals, his ministering to the sick and poor, and the example he set by his private and public life. "It is the personal rather than the official touch that wins," commented Ethelbert Talbot.[34] In these masculine communities it was vital, as mentioned, that the minister be willing to go out and meet the men on their own ground to discuss their problems and acquire a working knowledge of their lives. The strictly spiritual, the unbending, the solely denominational failed at this point. A willingness to doctor where the need was—whether it be on the "row," or "Hell's acre," or in some distant mine or small community—and to minister to all, whether Christian or not, was a prerequisite.

The pastor's role was never-ending and occasionally embarrassing. The Rev. William Mosher was visiting Bodie, going from door to door selling Bibles and evangelizing:

> I called at a fine house and asked a woman there if she would like to buy a bible? No. I don't want one. I said, unless you read the bible and pray, [and] lead a righteous life you cannot be saved. She said can't I be saved without reading the bible? I replied, if you reject the bible you will be apt to reject Jesus Christ and if you reject Jesus, you will be lost. Just then a man pushed open a door and said in a loud voice: if you say that a person can't be saved without the bible, you are a liar![35]

Mosher concluded the conversation and left, finding out later he had been visiting a house of prostitution.

The pastor symbolized the church to many townspeople. His effectiveness greatly influenced the role of the church. For example, he stood in the forefront of the fight for a better community. He might take a different tack, perhaps fight for unpopular reforms, but he needed to be involved in order to support church-related goals. Sunday closing, the fight against prostitution, and curbing saloons were a few that he might be expected to advocate. Pastors also supported public education, improvement of local government, children's

[33]See for example, *Owyhee Avalanche*, Sept. 9, 1865, *Grant County Herald* (Silver City, New Mexico), June 27, 1875, and *Silver World* (Lake City, Colorado), Dec. 25, 1875.

[34]Talbot, *My People*, p. 96.

curfew, and other reforms. Pushing too fast or too hard might alienate more than it converted. It took sound judgment and a carefully planned educational campaign to influence opinions. Through misguided actions, an otherwise sincere minister could flounder at this point and lose his effectiveness and support.

He and his congregation were often the leaders in providing charity on a frontier that was not particularly responsive to the problems of the poor and destitute. This was done without fanfare in the busy, transitory mining camp. The minister who functioned well within the total community found himself much more sought out than did his cloistered brother.

Not only the pastor, but the church as well, had to serve the larger community. John Eagle wrote his wife from California in 1853. "Our church is used for meetings sometimes, school house at other times and a jail at other times, so it answers a variety of purposes."[36] In these ways the church truly fulfilled its purpose. It served effectively as a social center (one of the few acceptable family ones), an educational center, a public forum for speakers and ideas (church pulpits resounded with everything from temperance to women's rights), and an outlet for the talents of the musically inclined, among others. It was the pastor's responsibility to see that the church was available for such civic callings; there was no better way to demonstate the outreach and concern for the entire community.

In the older mining towns, revivals occasionally helped capture converts to the sawdust trail or convinced listeners that they should sign the pledge. Either the local minister or an evangelist conducted nightly meetings. Opinions varied as to whether the campaign was effective. The Devil had a hard row to hoe, decided a Lake City, Colorado editor, during a local temperance and church revival: "Down with the Devil." How much back-sliding occurred once the emotionalism died down was a matter of conjecture, and the whole process could backfire. One California wrote that he could not enjoy the local revival, because "they cut up so at them."[37] Evangelistic activities seemed to have been more successful on a person-to-person basis than in the emotionally-charged camp meetings.

The minister then, as a pastor, had a significant role to fill; he could not afford to perform just as a preacher. Important to his success was the ability to arrange priorities properly so as to balance the two roles to the best advantage of his current pastorate and his mission. He was expected to "tire and tire again"; many did, but others left the mining regions for more settled churches elsewhere. And for all their work, the results might have been just what the editor of the

Downieville, California, *Mountain Echo,* October 9, 1852, observed: "we have," he said, "a talented and zealous preacher, a very commodious and comfortable church." The Downievilleites "had done about everything for the church with the exception of attending it."

Why did they come, these unsung men? Most of them, today forgotten ministers, devoted their lives to bettering the lot of their fellow man in the mining camp. This was no glamorous position likely to lead to ecclesiastical advancement or excessive monetary reward. To leave the comforts of a parish in a settled region must have seemed the height of folly to the uncalled. The reasons are as many as the ministers willing to come. Bishop George Randall put his finger on a common theme, when he wrote in 1866, "If this rising empire is to be rescued from the dominion of the devil, there is to be a long and severe battle, and there must be soldiers to fight it."[38] Fifteen years later, in the Colorado Methodist Annual Conference, it was noted, "Infidelity is bold and rampant." The fight was long and the battle had not been won when the mining frontier passed.

Another motivation common to all must have been concern for one's fellows. The work and suffering these ministers endured testified to the fact that they loved their neighbor in the true biblical sense. Discouragement dogged them: struggling to get a congregation established only to see the camp collapse; watching the faithful stray from the path; observing the work of a year disappear. All these things hurt, but the dedicated persisted in a seemingly unequal fight.

In the end the mining camp was richer for their having lived, worked, and preached there. These ministers provided a glimpse of something meaningful beyond the rampant materialism, a way of life separate from the saloons and parlor houses, and a rock upon which the faithful could cling and build. The rewards must have been personally satisfying. These men had carried the word and stored up treasures where neither thief could rob nor rust corrode.