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AS TOLD BY A CIRCUIT RIDER

The passing of Rev. Ralph J. Lamb of Tulsa recalls my last interview with him, October, 1936. He gave a vivid word picture of the days of the circuit rider. When thousands of cattle roamed, the circuit rider spread the gospel among the Indians and handful of whites who ruled over the country which has today become the oil center of the world. During the nineties and even in the early years of the twentieth century the lonely figure of the traveling pastor -- the circuit rider -- could be seen riding from some secluded ranch house to a cowboy camp, preaching as he visited.

Some of the experiences of a circuit rider in the early days are recalled by Reverend Lamb, who came to the Indian Territory in 1889, and who has been active ever since in church work among the less settled districts in this part of Oklahoma. Born in England, ordained as a young minister, Reverend Lamb found himself afflicted with a bronchial trouble which

required a change of climate. Accompanied by his wife he left England for Canada in 1887. After two years in Canada he came to Indian Territory to take charge of manual training work in the mission schools and at the same time act as a representative of the church in this district.

"Only old timers who were here in the early nineties can fully realize the change that the years have brought," said Reverend Lamb. "When I first came here, Tulsa was a struggling village with less than a thousand population; just a string of shacks lined along the road in a haphazard fashion comprised the town itself. A minister in those days had to be a jack-of-all-trades, just as the early pioneers were."

Reverend Lamb's first post in the Indian Territory (1889) was at Keweta (Coweta) where he made his home, going from there on his circuit throughout the surrounding country.

"Riding circuit in those days meant going on horseback for a journey of two weeks. I would load my saddle bags with supplies accordingly. Organized churches were rare, in fact, the few churches in existence were mostly Indian churches. Teaching the gospel meant visiting the big ranches and mission schools or more often gathering with a crew of cowpunchers around the camp fire at night."

His work often took him among the outlaws who made their rendezvous in the state, but seldom was he molested or threatened. On one occasion when an outlaw had disclosed his intention of running the minister out of the country, the outlaw's chief issued a warning telling of the drastic things which would happen if Rev. Lamb was injured.

"One of the incidents which I will always remember", said Reverend Lamb, "was a day when I officiated at the funeral of an outlaw who had been killed in a gun-battle with authorities."

"As I read the funeral sermon the sheriff and his posse were right behind me, and a little way off, concealed in a small grove, lay the band of outlaws to which the dead man belonged. I will admit I had several shaky moments, for, if the sheriff had found out these outlaws were near, there would have been a battle then and there, and I was directly in the line of fire.

"One of the first marriage ceremonies I performed was somewhat amusing to me," said Rev. Lamb, "I had received a call from one of the swains of the community stating that he desired my services for the happy occasion. The couple evidently believed there was a great deal of unnecessary formality, for when I asked the customary questions of the groom, he shifted his tobacco to the other cheek, leisurely spat, and replied; 'I reckon'. and when I asked the young lady the question if she took the man to be her husband, she likewise disposed of a chew of tobacco, spat, and said a trifle impatiently, 'that's what I came fer'".

After officiating at Coweta for two years, Reverend Lamb answered the call for a minister at Red Fork, which was at that time a lively little village, and gave promise of being a leading city of the Eastern part of Indian Territory. (Red Fork U. S. #66 and #75 - three miles southwest of Tulsa, now within the Tulsa City limits).

Chief among Reverend Lamb's recollections of the time he spent at Red Fork is that one winter the Dalton Brothers, Bob, Grant, and Emmett, famous outlaws of their time, were numbered among his congregation. Reverend Lamb said that they did not molest anyone though they may have carried on robberies elsewhere. Years later (1910) when Emmett was released from the Federal Penitentiary he sought out "Parson" Lamb as he called him to perform the marriage ceremony. (Rev. Lamb was living in Bartlesville at that time.) Dalton's bride to be was the girl who had been faithful to him during his bandit years and had waited seventeen years for his release from prison.

Reverend Lamb's young son was a favorite with the cowboys of the district, and was affectionately known as the "Kid". "When I conducted services at Red Fork," said Reverend Lamb, "the cow-punchers who attended my church always insisted that my son take up the collection. Each Sunday I would be informed by a group of cowboys, that the "Kid" would take up the collection. I often used to wonder why they would insist on this procedure, until I watched him closely one day. The boy who was six years old, would pass around the collection box, and when he was told to collect, he collected literally and efficiently. When he would pass the box in front of someone who was not in a giving mood, the boy refused to pass on, but stood with a smile on his face until the embarrassed recipient would put something in the box. The cow-punchers in the meantime would be struggling to control their mirth.

When Rev. Lamb's son died at Red Fork, the cowboys who had been members of his congregation

took charge of the funeral. The boy was to be buried at Vinita, and when the train pulled into Red Fork, a group of cowboys took possession of it and refused to allow any baggage to be placed in the car in which the casket was placed. The engine was draped in black, and when the train left for Vinita, two cowboys guarded the casket in the baggage car. "We're going to see the "Kid" through," they told Rev. Lamb, and they did. They guarded the body during the night. At the cemetery they stood through the ceremony and when the little grave had been filled and Rev. Lamb turned to thank them, the cowboys had disappeared.

After the death of his son, Reverend Lamb came to Tulsa where he was the third pastor of the Presbyterian Church. Four years later he had charge of two mission schools in the Cherokee Hills, later going to McAlester where he was pastor of the church and in charge of mission school. He was at Bartlesville for several years and for three years was connected with the Kendall College, now the University of Tulsa. When the world War broke out Rev. Lamb

served over-seas as Chaplain in the air-service.
After the war he served as field secretary of the
Presbyterian Church in the eastern half of Okla-
homa.

Five years ago at the age of seventy, he was
retired by the Board of National Missions after hav-
ing served fifty years in Presbyterian Churches and
Missions.

At the time of his passing (Feb. 20, 1937),
Reverend Lamb ranked as one of the oldest living
Missionary Pioneers in Oklahoma. During his past
summer (1936) he was filled vacancies in various
Tulsa Churches with the same enthusiasm as of old.

(Some of this material was taken from the
articles by LaVerne Shoenfeldt Anderson ---
Tulsa World. Reverend Lamb suggested that I
use the reference as it would save him need-
less repetition.)