

FOUNDING FATHERS — AND MOTHERS, II: HUGH W. RANKIN

by Tom Cox

S. E. Wishard, he of gospel tent fame, looms large not only in the founding of Pocatello's First Presbyterian Church, but in the history of Presbyterianism throughout Utah and southern Idaho. By contrast, the Rev. Hugh W. Rankin was never well known and today is almost totally forgotten. But Rankin was a part of the beginnings of our church every bit as much as Wishard and deserves to be remembered.

Piecing together Rankin's story is not easy, for he left few records and little has been written about him. He first enters the picture in 1886, when the *Presbyterian Home Missionary* applauded how he had "invaded the haunts of the reckless cowboys of Colorado with his intrepid calls to Christ . . . [winning] the ear and the respect of the wild rider of the cattle ranges." In 1894, the committee on evangelism of the Presbytery of Utah proposed bringing Rankin from Colorado "to help as many of our brethren as possible." It is not clear if an offer was actually extended or, if one was, if Rankin accepted, but in 1903 he became Sabbath School missionary for the Synod of Utah. In that position, he was to start Sunday schools in communities where there was no Presbyterian church. Sunday schools were not just forerunners of the churches that often soon followed, but also were deemed vital for providing the educated understanding of the Bible that Presbyterian leaders thought essential if Mormonism were to be successfully countered. As the Rev. Elmer E. Fife of the First Presbyterian Church of Boise put it, "The work of our synodical Sunday-school missionaries is of prime importance. They organize schools where there are none and endeavor to keep them alive and at work."

One of Rankin's first acts as Sunday school missionary was to find funds to buy a giant tent to house gospel meetings in places where there was no Presbyterian church. He and Wishard both donated money toward the purchase, as did assorted others, and in 1904 Rankin purchased the tent. It was no small affair; it seated 400 people!

The purchase was an immediate success. It was first sent to Rigby, where gospel meetings were held for three weeks and resulted in the creation of a new church there. With Rankin and Wishard working in tandem, gospel tent meetings followed in community after community. Rankin soon reported that he had more requests for gospel tent work than they could fill; in the first year after the purchase, he told synod, the two churchmen held 386 gospel tent meetings — which, of course, meant more than one a day even if one did not allow time for moving from place to place. Impressed with this record, the General Assembly's Evangelism Committee came forth with \$300 to aid in buying a second tent. Demand continued high, and a third tent soon followed. Under the circumstances, Pocatello was fortunate to have that first tent at the corner of Fifth and Center streets for four weeks.

Rankin was in charge not just of the tent, but of logistics in general. This was no small matter, for often — as was the case at Idaho Falls — the tent was full to overflowing during meetings. Moreover, one observer noted, when Wishard and his associates traveled from meeting place to meeting place, they took so much gear with them — including a pump organ — that "they resembled a traveling circus." With Wishard nearly eighty years old, it was essential to have a

younger man handle much of the day-to-day work of this great undertaking. But Rankin was more than just Wishard's point man, he was a full partner in the synod's missionary enterprises and as such preached frequently. In Pocatello, while Wishard preached every morning except Saturdays, Rankin preached every evening. (It was a vigorous series. In addition there were "cottage prayer meetings" every morning in various homes.) On the evening of July 13, as the series of gospel tent meetings was nearing its end, Rankin gave "a plain forceful sermon" espousing what the *Pocatello Tribune* described approvingly as "the old Gospel truth . . . without any sensationalism."

Rankin's efforts seem to have borne considerable fruit not just in Pocatello, but in other places as well. When he preached in Idaho Falls shortly after the meetings in Pocatello, a young listener was so moved that he promised Rankin he would be a good Christian even though he lived too far out in the country to attend church services regularly. When he took up his position in 1903, Rankin was the only Sunday school missionary in the synod. By 1905, recognizing the worth of Rankin's approach, each of the synod's three presbyteries had appointed a Sunday school missionary of its own. The Rev. John A. Sellers was Kendall presbytery's, but it was Rankin, not Sellers, who appears time after time in the early history of the Pocatello church.

In many ways, Rankin seems to have been at least as central in the founding of First Presbyterian as was Wishard, whose reminiscences contain manifold errors when he discusses the founding of the church (although in fairness, it must be noted that Wishard wrote his reminiscences some years after the fact, and memory has a way of playing tricks on one). By contrast, when the Synod of Utah met in Pocatello in 1905, it was Rankin, not Wishard who chronicled the founding of the church where the synod was meeting. The only apparent error in his account is that he set the cost of the church's chapel \$1000 too high — and, in his defense, it should be noted that building the chapel was not something with which he was directly involved. His account bears quoting at length:

"This pleasant and commodious chapel in which we are now meeting is the outgrowth of a work begun in a Gospel Tent by Dr. Wishard, myself and other friends a little more than a year ago.

"At that time there was neither Sunday school nor Church of any denomination east of the railroad tracks [in Pocatello], where there is an estimated population of 2,000 people. The second Sabbath of the meetings we organized a Sunday School with fifty members. The fourth Sabbath we organized a church with eleven members. In little more than a year they have erected this chapel at a cost of about \$3,500.00

"They have a Pastor and the greater portion of his salary is raised on the field. The membership has increased, and the work goes forward. Surely the blessing of God has rested upon our effort, and we may well say, 'See what the Lord has wrought!'"

Rankin continued as Sunday School missionary for the Synod of Utah until 1909, and, after the Synod of Idaho was separated from it, held the same position in it. He served as moderator when Kendall Presbytery met in Montpelier in 1906, filled the pulpit of First Presbyterian on a number of occasions, was a key figure in 1915 in the establishment a mission at Rio Vista (four miles

northeast of Pocatello), and later that same year was one of three ministers who conducted the services at which the Rev. Marcus E. Lindsey was installed as First Presbyterian's fourth minister. Rankin died in 1926. The record of the General Assembly of that year recounts his story:

“Rev. Hugh W. Rankin, who for many years led the Sunday School Missionary forces in Utah and Idaho died suddenly while attending the meeting of the General Assembly. He was familiarly known among cattlemen as the “cowboy preacher. . . .” The cause of Sunday School Missions has never known a more faithful and consecrated worker. No hardship was severe enough to turn him away from a known need. With humility of spirit, but with evangelistic fervor, he proclaimed the gospel by which he lived and in which he labored, in a manner that changed the course of many lives toward God. Scores of mission Sunday schools were established through his efforts, many of which have since grown into strong churches.”

Leigh Gittens characterized Rankin simply as “our good friend.” He was all that and more: he was a crucial player in the founding of the First Presbyterian Church — one of those “strong churches” that grew from a Sunday school he established. Every bit as much as Wishard, Hugh Rankin deserves to be remembered as one of our founders — and he remained on the scene far longer than his better-known colleague. Unfortunately, no photograph of him has been located; he must remain absent from that display of Wishard and the ministers of the First Presbyterian Church, a display in which he certainly deserves a place.