

CHURCH AND COMMUNITY, I: PERCY HAVENOR AND THE EDUCATIONAL IMPERATIVE

by Tom Cox

S. E. Wishard may have seen education as the key to countering Mormonism, but it had been a Presbyterian priority long before that. John Knox had pointed the way. If the Bible was a good and sufficient guide for faith and practice, and the individual was to be free to approach God without intermediaries, as Knox insisted, a literate population that could read the Bible with understanding was necessary — with the help, of course, of an educated clergy capable of grappling with the difficulties biblical interpretation presented. The upshot was that in the century following the Reformation, Scotland developed what was in fact a national system of education. For payment of a small fee, schooling was available to all, regardless of their station in life. Scotland enjoyed widespread literacy and five universities at a time when England, although far more populous, had but two universities and, with rare exceptions, opened the door to education only to the upper classes. The Scottish Enlightenment that produced such pivotal thinkers as Adam Smith and David Hume, and greatly influenced the thinking of Thomas Jefferson and other leaders in the American Revolution, was no accident, it was the outgrowth of educational ideas set in motion by John Knox and woven into the warp and woof of Presbyterian thinking ever since.

In the United States, Presbyterians opened colleges and seminaries across the land, established mission schools, and supported the creation of public schools open to all. But change came as the West developed. As various historians have noted, Presbyterian mission schools laid the foundation for a system of free public schools in Utah and elsewhere — including in nearby Malad — and in the process made mission schools less and less necessary. Generally speaking, Presbyterians had not fought the development of public schools, but had been among their strongest supporters.

By the time the First Presbyterian Church was established, public education was well on its way in Pocatello. Bonneville school and the Academy of Idaho were both in place on the east-side. If the new church's members were to be true to their heritage of educational emphasis, they would have to find fresh vehicles for the purpose. They soon did so.

No member of the First Presbyterian Church illustrates the commitment to education in its broader sense better than William P. (“Percy”) Havenor. Born in Carson City, Nevada, in 1877, Havenor moved to the Gate City in 1906, but even before then he was active in the community. While still a resident of Salt Lake City, Havenor spent much time in Pocatello as a surveyor for the Oregon Short Line — a Union Pacific subsidiary that had been completed through to Portland in 1883, giving the Pacific Northwest its first transcontinental rail connections — and helped to start a chapter of the Young People's Society of Christian Endeavor which met at the west-side's First Congregational Church. The organization was dedicated to educating young people to be better citizens by being better Christians and to be more knowledgeable in both capacities. Just when the chapter was launched is not clear, but material bearing the date January 11, 1903, lists W. P. Havenor as president of “The Y.P.S.C.E. of the First Congregational Church of Pocatello, Idaho” (and Mrs. E. C. White as vice-president and corresponding secretary).

Although officially inter-denominational, Christian Endeavor had a strong Presbyterian component and had been accorded the approval of the General Assembly, which declared that the young people's organization had the "relation to the Church . . . of a child to its mother," its chapters helping to "sustain . . . the Church." Annually, starting in 1895, the church's Westminster Press published *The Presbyterian Christian Endeavor Manual*. It is in the front of Havenor's copy of the manual for 1903 that one finds the written notes about the Pocatello chapter. Included on the oversight or "Lookout" committee was the Rev. G. H. Perry of the First Congregational Church, himself an ordained Presbyterian. Misled by an article in the *Pocatello Tribune*, Leigh Gittens wrote that Christian Endeavor was organized in the city on February 5, 1905, but what was actually created that day was a new *chapter*, one tied directly to the First Presbyterian Church. C. Foster Cable was the new group's president. Havenor, Mrs. White, Cable, and others from the new church were active, and both the Rev. Hedges and his wife, Ella, lent their support. In 1907 the new chapter had 44 members, and a year later when the Christian Endeavor union of Pocatello met in convention at the First Presbyterian Church, Havenor was elected president of the larger body. First Presbyterian's ties to CE continued. The Rev. Claude van der Maaten, the church's fourth minister, was an especially strong supporter of Christian Endeavor, and when he ended his ministry in Pocatello in 1915 it was so he could devote full time to it.

After Percy Havenor moved to Pocatello in 1906, he set up and managed the Bannock Engineering Company and in 1907 became City Engineer for Pocatello — in which role he was instrumental in having concrete sidewalks installed — and in time Engineer and Road Overseer for Bannock County. In 1909 he wed Ada Schellenberger, daughter of a Mennonite minister, in a ceremony held in the home of J. B. Bistline, one of the pillars of First Presbyterian. Havenor served the Presbyterian church on many a committee, was a ruling elder, trustee, and clerk of session for extended periods, and long taught Sunday School (he was persuasive in getting others to do so too; when Grace Tarr Bistline turned down his suggestion that she teach a Sunday School class, he would not take "no" for an answer; "you've got to," he said, and she did. In addition, Havenor donated land next to his ranch on Rio Vista Road, a few miles northeast of Pocatello, on which members of the church joined with the Rev. Rankin in building a log mission Sunday school building. In short, up to the time of his death in 1950, Havenor was a sort of "Mr. Presbyterian" in Pocatello. As Leigh Gittens has put it, no "committee, board or organization was complete without his good advice and steady hand . . . he seemed never to tire of doing good."

As one might expect from his early activity in Christian Endeavor and his on-going role as a Sunday school teacher, Havenor was especially popular with the church youth. To them, he was "Pa" Havenor, and reminiscences of members who were young adherents of the church in its early years are replete with stories in which Havenor played a central role. They would use his old farm truck to drive to the popular annual church picnics on Rapid Creek, and clearly enjoyed the freedom. On one occasion, when teenage driving resulted in spilling the milk cans in the back, they pooled their resources and left the money quietly behind — but never confessed. Havenor grinned and said nothing.

In the 1930s Havenor shifted his focus from Christian Endeavor to the Boy Scouts. As a result of his efforts, the First Presbyterian Church sponsored Troop 1. He spent years working for the latter, like CE dedicated to producing better citizens through education and healthy activity — each Scout pledging “On my honor, I will do my best, to do my duty, to God and my country. . . .” Havenor did his duty, filling many a position in the Scouts and as a result of his long service was presented with the Silver Beaver, Scouting’s highest service award. Ray Rubel and other members of First Presbyterian followed in his footsteps when they organized Troop 313 under church sponsorship in the 1950s, but Percy Havenor led the way.

Percy Havenor’s work was not limited to the Presbyterian Church, CE, and the Scouts; he was also an active member of the Grange and Kiwanis, among other things. And in the process of all this activity, that sense of social superiority Havenor had betrayed when he had objected to the Rev. Hedges admitting a poor family to church membership seems to have disappeared. One finds no hint of it in the later record. In the process of educating young people to be better citizens, he seems to have become one himself. Would that we all made such progress!