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JAMES GILRUTH: METHODIST CIRCUIT RIDER, PROVIDER OF SOME SIDELIGHTS ON OUR VILLAGE, TOWNSHIP & COUNTY, ON HIS 200TH BIRTHDAY



sketch by Michael Jung

"Granville has been generous to me, from my first arrival a quarter of a century ago, even unto this evening. One of its biggest gifts has been James Gilruth."

Tony Stoneburner

Editor's Note

Denison University Professor Tony Stoneburner gave this presentation before the Granville Historical Society at the Old Academy Building on Tuesday (Jan 26), 26 1993. This article is the result of many years of research into the life and work of a relatively unknown figure central to the religious life of Granville in the first half of the Nineteenth Century. The editors of The Historical Times are pleased to present this important historical work in print for the first time.

James Gilruth: Methodist Circuit-Rider

Granville has been generous to me, from my first arrival a quarter of a century ago, even unto this evening. One of its biggest gifts has been James Gilruth. I had met him before, in a year of his *Journal*, edited by William Warren Sweet and published in volume IV, "The Methodists," of his masterwork of primary texts, *Religion on the American Frontier*. I was living in Ann Arbor at the time and that year of Gilruth's *Journal*, 1834, he had lived in Ann Arbor, as a Presiding Elder, or District Superintendent, of his denomination. But to come to this village and to find ___ in the fine history of local Methodism by William Stewart ___ that the

Methodist episcopacy had appointed James Gilruth five times, from 1830 through 1845, to circuits that included our local Methodist people, led me to seek assistance in discovering the present location of his manuscript *Journal*, an enormous multi-volume document, which he had started in 1831 (halfway through his second year on Granville Circuit), in a book he had made himself by pasting sheets of paper together.

Gilruth as a Large Man

When I refer to James Gilruth as a big gift or a big find, I mean by BIG not only the large *Journal* but also the human being physically huge and the person intellectually and spiritually capacious. I don't know his height—which must have been at least average or above ___ but I have some reports of his weight, including half a one of his own. On his 39th birthday in 1832 (He had left Granville for Putnam circuit in the previous fall), he says that about a dozen years before, he had become an itinerant preacher, his weight had wavered between "...205 and 210 pounds that it was now. . ." and then the *Journal* has a blank.*

I praise his *Journal* as a treasure box of information, and it is. But occasionally it also offers frustrations to its readers, skipping a space to produce a blank because at the place and time of writing, he does not have at hand a needed name or number. We have just

come on one of these blanks. Yet, the very rhetoric of his sentence makes clear that he has not lost but gained weight as a circuit rider.

Pilcher, writing about his memory of Gilruth as Presiding Elder in Michigan, 1833-1836, says the following:

One of the largest, and, yet, one of the most supple men we ever knew, was REV. JAMES GILRUTH... In consequence of his great weight, Mr. Gilruth found it necessary, on his long routes and bad roads, to have two horses. He would ride one for a time, and allow the other to follow, and then he would change.

And Burgess, who grew up in Mount Vernon, writes:

Another old hero is often before me, whose works of love and grace follow him, Rev. James Gilruth. He was physically the largest minister I ever saw. I stood beside him once in a pulpit, and the contrast was interesting, as I came only within three hundred pounds of his weight: Yet I was a young man grown to my highest reach.

Gilruth and Granville

But who is James Gilruth and what has he to do with our community? Our

20th-century history of the village omits Gilruth; Professor Utter does not mention him. Our 19th-century history includes him; the Reverend Mr. Bushnell refers to Gilruth twice (224, 225), both times in lists of Methodist clergypersons, and the first time he presents a vignette as well:

Mr. Gilruth was an effective revival preacher. He was prominent at the camp meetings held in the vicinity. He was a man of powerful muscle, and rowdies met with poor fare at his hands. His strong arm would put them in their places, even at the expense of their clothing if need be.

The minister-historian first of all names the preaching of Gilruth, but then names his strength. Gilruth was not just big; he was also strong. Indeed his size and strength became legendary in Ohio and Michigan, the subject of folklore. Methodist circuit-rider autobiography starting in the 1840s, and county and local histories, after the Civil War and at the approach of the national centennial, reduced to print the stories in oral circulation. I once made a preliminary study and judged that Gilruth had almost as much coverage as John Chapman—before Johnny Appleseed became the subject of an essay in a leading national periodical, the catalyst for the gathering of scattered stories into a single collection and for Johnny Appleseed emerging as a national folk-figure. Gilruth, regional

folk-figure, came to the verge of more widespread recognition—but did not receive the final push into countrywide awareness (subsequently dropping out of sight). The most famous of his exploits is his throwing an axe over the courthouse steeple at Franklinton (now a part of greater Columbus) when he was around.

Here are two other favorites about his feats of strength to judge by their recycling. A miller or storeowner told Gilruth, whose reputation as a strongman had reached him, he would give Gilruth two kegs of flour if Gilruth carried them home without setting them down. Ever an economist, Gilruth put one under each arm and earned them by doing so!

Gilruth, called to court as witness of an assault, found his testimony subject to scathing skepticism from the defense-lawyer during cross-questioning. The lawyer asked Gilruth if he were *sure* how hard the accused had hit the accuser. Gilruth, affirming his sureness, asked and received permission of the judge to demonstrate the force of the blow. Whereupon Gilruth hit the defense-lawyer on the chin, flooring him!

No wonder that Gilruth excited gilded age rhetoric such as the following from an editor of a newspaper in Lancaster who had grown up in Delaware: "We recollect too, the stories of his immense physical power and prowess which his majestic stature and Herculean

build were calculated to fully corroborate." The legends belong to both his wild youth and his ministerial maturity.

Born in the Ohio Valley

Gilruth was born in the Ohio valley 29 January 1793. Both of his parents had come to this country from Scotland. His mother grew up on the West Virginia frontier. His father, a weaver, reached the same frontier. They met and married and, April 1797, moved on a couple of flat-boats and a large parogue *via* the Ohio River, downstream to the French Grant in southernmost Ohio, near what is now Ironton, in what was still new country.

Today (January 26) is the deathdate of Lewis Mumford. James Gilruth strikes me as not a bad example of what Mumford analyzed and called New World Man—the person who weaves the fabric of life out of three strands: *primitive*, *classical*, and *pragmatic*.

Gilruth was born on a secondary frontier. Native peoples were not present to represent primitive life—but the wilderness to which their lives were a creative response was still present and the older generation had waterskills and woodskills which were partly, if largely indirectly, learned from native peoples. Outdoors in all seasons and weathers; able to find a way in the forest; knowing the flora and fauna and their uses nutritional and medicinal; living off the envi-

ronment; developing physique, strength, skills, and courage. Even as a circuit rider and Presiding Elder, Gilruth spent some of every day, and much of many, under the sky. He bathed in rivers, including Raccoon & Licking. At the headsprings of the Scioto, he found a wild goose feather. He did not braid it in his hair or fasten it on his garments—but, picking it up, kept it—to use as the quill of his penspersonship in journal-keeping--but I suspect also, symbolically, as a token of the sky, plume that once winged the wide continent now here in his hand marking an account of a human life across the page of a *Journal*.

In 1837, on a journey for the Community of United Christians, heading south, he crossed the divide between the Lake Erie-St Lawrence drainage and the Ohio-Mississippi drainage. As soon as he came to a stream that flowed into his native valley, he dismounted and came to its banks, kneeling and stretching himself out flat so that he could sip its waters—to drink not of the stream but of his own identity, as Robert Penn Warren has said about another.

A Widely Read Person

Gilruth, with minimal formal education, became an autodidact and a voracious reader. What did he read? To give a small sample: *The Bible*, Church History, Wesley's *Sermons*; Ancient

History, *Plutarch's Lives*; the *Koran*; the history of the abolition of the slave trade; a history of South America; *The Book of Mormon*; the *Life of Black Hawk*, a native person; the life of a black clergyperson, the Reverend Mr. Haynes of Granville, Massachusetts, by the Rev Mr. Cooley, a sermon of whose composition the Yankees arriving here in 1805 heard read their first Sunday in their new home. He also read novels—even though Methodism officially condemned novel reading at that time—and newspapers.

If the primitive strand is oral and the classical strand is literary (and analytical and theoretical), the pragmatic strand is diagrammatic and mathematical. Gilruth has scientific and technological interests. He looks for and sees Haley's comet. He studies the angle of grade on the National Pike as it edges westward, and its building material. He inspects the factories and mills that he passes to understand their machinery and to keep up with new developments. He himself attempts inventions a powerwheel for a watermill, a graincutter. He brings a similar attitude to society. If we can improve mechanical arrangements, we can improve social arrangements.

While he is on Granville Circuit in 1831, he reads one day the defense of Bishop Chase, president of Kenyon College, against published accusations that he had handled funds for the school irresponsibly. The next day, with another

person, Gilruth discusses how it would be good if youth of the laboring class could get a college education and pronto, Gilruth is producing a schedule of study, eating, working, and sleeping that, in his analysis, would be economically feasible (Gilruth had not had such schooling, so it is not surprising that the scheme does not seem altogether feasible educationally.). But there he was, proposing to improve social arrangements—and in broad outline, if riot in the details of its schedule, what he suggests resembles quite a bit the work-study program of students who enrolled in the college, opening six months later, in December of that same year, which was to become Denison University.

Gilruth, close approximation to New World Man, was very capable in direct interaction with nature, with books, and with machines. Gilruth is big in more than body. He is big in knowing the world and in knowing God and, in terms of the latter knowledge, he exists, according to his own understanding and his own directing of his life, less for himself than for God and other persons.

A Typical Yet Atypical Methodist Minister

Gilruth is a typical Methodist minister, and in the first decade and a half of his ministerial life, it seemed that he was also having a successful denominational career. What was typical about

him brought him to a peak as Presiding Elder of Detroit District in the mid-1830's. After that, he was at a rather low flat level. What was typical about him led to that peak. What was atypical led to the flat. I respect the typical (the effective preacher in the pulpit, the spiritual director in Class Meeting and Prayer Meeting, the speaker for temperance, the diligent collector of funds and record-keeper), but I am fascinated by the atypical.

Let us turn to what is atypical. We live in a time of revisionist history writing. Figures of the past, often heroes and heroines are looked at in the light of current values and found to be at least benighted, and thereby demoted. One way to get an angle on the atypicality of Gilruth is to examine him from a revisionist perspective. If we ask about his attitude toward native peoples, Afro-Americans, and Latinos, he seems advanced for his place and time.

I have found only one indirect reference to Latinos: commenting on a history of South America which he had read and the effort at democracy in the wake of Bolivar, he says that Latin American democracy is superior to that of the United States inasmuch as it does not build slavery into its constitutions.

One can tell from the last remark that Gilruth is an opponent of slavery. Indeed, although Methodism condemned

abolitionism during the 1830's & 1840's, he is an abolitionist. I quote some of the outcries in his *Journal* during 1831 while he was on the Granville circuit:

May 16 [1831] ...at Meanys, reading the Genius of Universal Emancipation—O Cursed Cursed, Cursed Slavery! Heavens, Purge my Country of this foul sin!

Jun 6 Mon. Rose 1/2 past 5—Morning Clear & pleasant—looked about the New saw mill till 7: at 8 Set out for my appointment reading Clarkson `s History preached with some liberty from Matt 18: 15, 16, 17&had an excellent Class Meeting. This afternoon I finished reading Clarkson `s History of the Abolition of the Slave Trade. In reading this work I have been astonished at the persevering labors of these worthy Men who undertook to overturn the Slave trade & no less so at the perverse Conduct of those Concerned in its Support Never in my life did I so ardently desire the gift of tongues. Never have I felt myself of so little worth in the cause of humanity: O Slavery, Slavery, thou Grave of humanity, Thou tomb of piety, my soul hateth thee in all thy forms. I have felt much waked up to attempt the subversion of slavery in these states, but when I look at the work, & see the length

of time necessary to affect this, I am sure my scheme will fail, unless it be so formed as to perpetuate the struggle through suc[c]eeding generations. To effect this I have long thought of a christian Community governed by the express words or laws of the N T Then why do I stand? Alas I have been tied—I petitioned the General Conference but it was rejected—I asked leave of the Annual Conference, but it was denied me. I See if ever I am to enter this work, the Father and Mother [He means Methodism.] will have to be forsaken. O God Most holy! "Abandon me not to temptation!"

On Native Peoples

But many people who advocated the end of slavery judged Afro-Americans inferior to white people. Gilruth appears not to have shared that prejudice. Although he grew up on a second-stage frontier from which native peoples were absent, his parents and others of their generation had known border warfare, yet Gilruth does not share in the attitude of many participants in *it* that the only good Indian is a dead one. Again, this is the case even though he served as a soldier in the War of 1812, an extension of border warfare. Perhaps his year as missionary to the Wyandots had something to do with creating a positive attitude towards native peoples. That year, 1827, he made

Apr 1st 1831 ^{Zoville} After a long neglect
again resume my diary, with a resolution
to continue it regularly - feeling much regret
that I have ^{not} attended to it in a proper manner,
especially during the year I had charge of
the Indian Mission at Upper Sanfusky; also
before & since.

This morning till 12 I was busily employed
in reading the bible, Christian Advocate &c
with other news papers; at 11^o I went to see
after dinner I rode to see John Roberts - through
a pretty hard thicket - made this book
&c spent 2 or 3 hours conversing with him on the
first settling of this country - hunting - poor
Jacksons policy, &c, &c. but all I fear, to me
real good to his soul, or my own. When done
entered the above, as a memorandum of
so much precious time lost forever; O that
it may be the last while I live, thus lost

Apr 5th Rose at 6. A loss more wast of time than that
of the worst kind, viz. sleep - from Mr John Roberts I
learned the following cure for the Piles, Burns, or sores - viz
Take a parcel of fresh Man dung, & stew it for half an hour
in Hop lan, then strain it, & use the lard as an oint
ment. It removes the painful burning of the Piles, &
heals them - "For it will rep the anus."

* the materials of which were a horse's hair &c

The first page of Gilruth's journal (from the Methodist Archives at Drew University)

an annual report in which he celebrated the rapid acculturation of these people to the ways of the dominant society—gatherer/hunters becoming farmers, nomadic people of a migratory circle becoming settlers, people replacing native dress with that of white society. Here he sounds simply like a typical linker of Christianity and Euro-American civilization. But, once again, Gilruth appears not to have shared the common prejudice that native peoples were inferior. I offer parts of two entries in support of my assertion.

Tues Aug 20 [1833 in Cincinnati]
1 P M. spent a couple of hours with Jacob Young—He has become a warm advocate for the Flathead Mission. [In Oregon]; his plan is to Send a Colony of Good Methodists, extinguish the Indian title to a suitable quantity of land—build a strong Fort—Then send out Missionaries in every direction. He argued that the Country was claimed by the Rus[s]ians & English—that if the American government did not occupy it, one or other of them would, that if not Colonized by Good men, it would by bad... I objected that his plan was exactly calculated to undo the Indians & hedge up the way of the Gospel among them—That his colony would be an entering wedge to All our vices; that wicked men would settle there from earthly inducements—that more land would be

wanted—that speculation would follow; That the Indians instead of Seeing them benefactors would find them destroyers... Referred him to Wm Penns Settlement of Pennsylvania.

Gilruth does not confuse mission and nationalistic imperialism. The second piece of support comes from his first year of journal-keeping while on Granville Circuit.

Ap 11 [1831] Rose at 5. Morning cloudy.... Stopped at Br Thomas Mendenhalls to borrow "The Alcoran" a work I had never read from him I learned the following cure for worms in children or Bots in horses.... Went on to my Br A Hall appointment. Reading the Coran—Preached with life & power from I Cor 3:11-15. Met Class and had a Most precious time Received 6 into full connection & dismissed 2 by crt [Certificate] Went home with Br Wm Drago who had been 25 years a prisoner among the Ottaway Indians. Of their manners and customs, he gave the following relation.

- *Of Marriage*
- *Of their Publick spring feast*
- *A Curious Society Among them*

Gilruth is interested in native culture for itself. He who usually goes to

bed between 9 and 10 stayed up till 2 to hear and record these customs. "O What irregularity," he exclaims. We exclaim: "O what curiosity!" I find it wonderful to think of his conducting late-night ethnographic investigation in Licking County even before what became Denison University had come in to being.

On Women

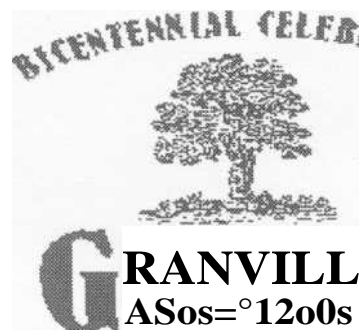
Perhaps in relation to women, he has not gone beyond the first stage of consciousness-raising. Women have more abilities than society encourages them to develop and employ. I think he did not come to have a description and critique of patriarchy. Here is a statement as resounding as he gets.

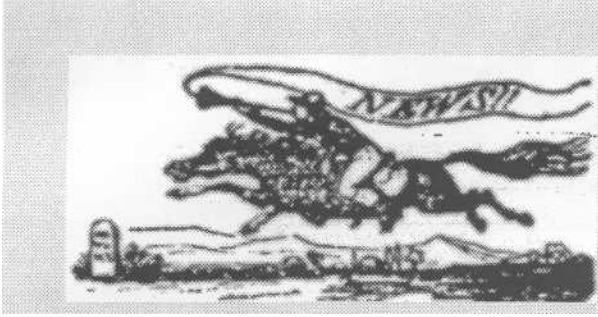
Mrs. M Kelly with some other women, and Joseph Crank... were crossing the Ohio River in a canoe and when they were about the middle by some mistake the canoe was upset. The water was deep, and none on board could swim but Mrs. Kelly; she caught each one as they were sinking, made them lock hands across the bottom of the canoe. She brought up Crank and bade him climb up and sit a straddle of the canoe; she then swam out and got a paddle that was floating near and gave it to him saying: "Now paddle for the shore!" which he did, and brought all safe to land. George Washington or Napoleon Bonaparte under

the circumstances, could not have out-generated Mary Kelly in this case....Had these women had an education equal to their natural abilities, and been placed in suitable surroundings, their superiors would have been few among the daughters of Eve.

Gilruth promotes higher-level education for women throughout his ministry. But he is even more atypical than his suffering only a little demotion at the hands of revisionists suggests.

To Be Continued...in the next issue of TheHistoricalTimes.





MUSEUM RENOVATION

The Museum Committee, under the leadership of Cynthia Cort, and George Wales' Properties Committee have been busy this year renovating the Historical Society's Museum. New lighting has been installed, and the exhibits have been rearranged and labeled. The basement exhibition of tools has been completely revamped. Join us in admiring all the fine work undertaken since the beginning of the year. Do plan to visit the museum before we close for the season in mid-October!

OLD COLONY BURIAL GROUND

Flo Hoffman's Burial Ground Committee has continued its work on the restoration of Granville's first cemetery. Another walking tour was enormously successful in early June. The restoration team of Jim and Minxie Fannin, from Concord, Massachusetts, spent several days in Granville both supervising and working on this continuing project.

NEED FOR HOSTS

John Kessler and Maggie Brooks again request that members of the society seriously consider volunteering to be hosts. A lack of hosts contributes to the limited opening hours of the museum. No experience is necessary other than enthusiasm; training will gladly be provided. For more information call the Museum at 587-3951.

GRANVILLE CIVIL WAR AND OHIO MILITARY HISTORY ROUNDTABLE

Ed McCaul is the Historical Society's new coordinator for the Roundtable. The Society is delighted that Ed will take charge of the Roundtable events. Ed is an active military historian and has been an ardent participant of the Roundtable discussions.

Here is the schedule for the autumn 2000 meetings. You will probably note that the topics that will be discussed have been expanded to include other topics beside the American Civil War. These new topics will include Ohio Military History. Ed hopes all Historical Society members find this area of history as interesting as the Civil War. All Society members and their guests are welcome to these discussions.

Tuesday, September 19th: "Saint Clair's Defeat":

John Montgomery, a retired Lieutenant Colonel, will discuss the largest defeat of the American Army by American Indians. This defeat is little known and has been overshadowed by the various western Indian Wars.

Tuesday, October 17th: "William Quantrell and His `Friends":

Clarke Wilhelm, who needs no introduction, will discuss the career and times of William Quantrell the infamous leader of a band of Missouri raiders.

Tuesday, November 21st: "Four Generals and a Stove Maker":

Tony Lisska, who needs no introduction, will discuss the lives and careers of five distinguished Civil War officers from Licking County – Charles Woods, William Woods, Willard Warner, William Rosecrans, and Joseph Wehrle.

Tuesday, December 19th: "Corking the Bottle—The Third Battle of Winchester":

Ed McCaul will discuss the Third Battle of Winchester and how, due to geography, it was a much more important than what is commonly thought. The control of Winchester was crucial to any southern hope of fighting the war on northern soil.

The meetings will be held, as usual, at the Old Academy Building at Elm and South Main Streets at 7:30 PM. If you have any questions or want to be involved in any future presentations, please call Ed at 522-5091 or e-mail him at mccaul.1@osu.edu

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We hope that the members of the Society
have enjoyed reading about Granville's history!

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