

REV. WILLIAM WESTLEY VAN ORSDEL

(1848 – 1919)

Back in 1872 when preachers, like frontier judges, rode circuit, the Rev. William Van Orsdel began an evangelistic crusade in Montana that would span nearly 50 years. Brother Van, as he came to be known, held forth on a circuit that took in 50,000 square miles. To serve the spiritual needs of his people, he rode horseback and stagecoach. He was immortalized in two Russell paintings. Writers later told how Brother Van served up the old-time religion:

He fed it to them raw, he drove home his simple philosophy with fervent blasts. He fought sin with bare knuckles. He excoriated the devil. He whooped it up for the Lord in both sermon and song. Every man was 'brother' and every woman 'sister.' He was showman. He had to be to hold them, but he was a sincere showman.

Active as a delegate representing the frontier at national conferences, the circuit-riding Methodist preacher continued his mission until 1890 when he was appointed presiding elder of the Great Falls district. In 1892 he became superintendent of the new Northern Montana Mission, holding the post five years. Next came two years as presiding elder of the Helena district, then a return to Great Falls.

