

Rev. Isaac McCoy

First Baptist Missionary to the Indians

Isaac McCoy ranks with Adoniram Judson and William Carey as one of the greatest American Baptist missionaries, if he were not one of the greatest missionaries of all time and of all nations. In 1700, James McCoy, a Scottish emigrant orphan lad ten years old, landed at Baltimore. After a few years he migrated to Kentucky and later, according to Dr. E. C. Routh, married a member of the Bruce family of Scotland living in Fayette County, Pennsylvania. Among the six children born to this union was William, the father of the noted missionary. William McCoy was a Baptist preacher on the Kentucky frontier. Isaac, also one of a family of six children, was born in Fayette, Pennsylvania, June 13, 1784.

Isaac was baptized at the age of seventeen by Rev. Joshua Morris. On October 6, 1803, he was married to Miss Christiana Polke and in the next year he and his young wife moved to Clark County, Indiana, and united with the Silver Creek Church, the oldest Baptist church in that territory. From the time he was converted, Isaac had a deep sense of his responsibility as a Christian, and on August 13, 1808, he was licensed to preach by the Silver Creek Church and ordained two years later by the Maria Creek Church, his father and Rev. George Waller serving as a presbytery. Isaac then became the first pastor of the latter church, which had been organized the previous year.

For several years, Isaac served as pastor of the Maria Creek Church, but during the same period he worked as a wheelwright to support his family.

It was while he was so engaged that he first became acquainted with the Indian country of Indiana. During the summer of 1816 he visited the Indiana outpost settlements and the Northwestern Indian tribes.

On March 26, 1817, McCoy wrote from the western part of Indiana to the Board of Managers of the Baptist Convention stating that he would accept an appointment as a missionary in the Mississippi Valley. It is probable that his interest in this area was prompted by advice he had received from Rev. Luther Rice only a short time previously. It will be remembered that Peck and Welch also received their appointments to work in this region. When the Board replied, McCoy was asked to labor among the settlers in a number of the counties of Indiana and Illinois and to extend his efforts to "the Indians as far as practicable," That McCoy was more interested in working among the Indians than the settlers, is seen in his statement that "I could not suppose that the Board had contemplated that I should do any thing of importance for the Indians." To serve the Indians became his passionate resolve. "Notwithstanding I had no assurance of patronage beyond the current year," he wrote, "I would, the Lord willing, make an effort to establish a mission." And a short time later he launched his first mission enterprise.

On November 24, 1817, McCoy applied to General Thomas Posey, agent of the Weas, Miamies and Kickapoos in Indiana and Illinois for information concerning those tribes and for his approval and aid in establishing a mission among them. Posey was greatly impressed with McCoy's earnestness and readily agreed to such a project, but before he could render considerable aid he died, in March, 1818. In June his successor introduced the young missionary

to the Indian chiefs and told them of McCoy's wishes. The Indians could not be sure. Here was a representative of a race that had been the Indian's nemesis. Pressed by the ever swelling tide of white homeseekers on the east, the red men had been forced to give up one fine hunting ground after another. Traders from among these encroaching whites had sold the red people whiskey, had mercilessly impoverished them in barter, and at last the remnants of the once proud warriors were miserable dependents on the bounty of their agents. The assembled chiefs stared at McCoy uncertainly. Then one replied, "Yes, we are very glad to see you, and to hear your propositions to benefit us. We believe you are sincere; we will think of this matter, and at a future opportunity, we will give you an answer." But the disappointed missionary knew quite well that the odds were against him. Two sympathetic French interpreters present offered McCoy their half-breed children as pupils, but when they learned that this was to be a Baptist mission, they would not send them.

While on a preaching tour in Kentucky seeking to arouse support for his proposed mission, McCoy's thirteen year old daughter died of typhus. McCoy's heart was saddened in this great loss. "The stroke was more severe," he later wrote, "on account of it occurring in my absence." But he felt that the hand of God was in it, "We afterwards believed," he said, "**that the event was sanctified to our benefit, in inducing us with the less reluctance to let go the hold which our affections had upon the people and things in the regions of civilized society, and in enabling us to trust all — our children, ourselves, and all our interests — to God.**" It is little wonder that a marvelous faith like this was to surmount every obstacle. McCoy entered in his journal: "*I have been young and now am old, yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken nor his seed begging bread.*"

Nine months elapsed of his first year's appointment and still the suspicious Indians had not given McCoy permission to establish his mission among them. This was indeed discouraging. How could he be assured that the tolerant Board would continue to support him if he could not show more results from his labors? But again faith prompted him to action. He purchased a small tract of land a little without a white settlement and adjacent to the Wea country and erected two log cabins for his family and his school. Then on October 27, 1818, he and his family started for their wilderness home. "Our separation from our church was affectionate," he wrote later, "such as might be expected after a happy connection of eight years. On the evening preceding our departure a meeting for prayer was held at our house, which was attended by many." McCoy had employed a Mr. C. Martin to help him with his school, even though he was a disbeliever. Teachers were hard to procure and he could not find Christians available.

For several months many of the leading chiefs of the Indians among whom he worked were suspicious of his intentions. He talked with the Weas and Kickapoos and explained how he hoped to be of benefit to their children. An old Kickapoo chief muttered in reply: "Ah! I would rather have a good dram of whiskey than to hear that!"

This was McCoy's introduction to the liquor problem that threatened to swamp his every effort. Whiskey had been the bane of the Indians. In drunken debauches the miserable wretches, once proud resourceful warriors, impoverished their people by spending their federal annuities for whiskey instead of food. The result was famine, plague, murder, crime, all of which McCoy saw all about him.

His horror because of these things was expressed again and again in his writings. "Never before had I been so sensibly affected with the unhappy conditions of those miserable Indians," he wrote. "The whites furnished them with ardent spirits, under the influence of which the horrible shrieks, lamentable crying, and awful howlings, which emulated from their encampments, I thought would have been sufficient to have awakened the compassion of all who could have heard them, except those sinners who profited by their ignorance and sported with their miseries."

For several days after his arrival, McCoy was busy in clearing his land, building his houses, and getting his mission ready for its opening. On December 1 he left home to journey as far as the Shawnee villages on the Ohio frontier to broaden his acquaintance with the Indians, to obtain pupils for his school, and to decide where a permanent mission could be established within the Indian country. Mrs. McCoy "was left in the woods," the distressed missionary wrote, "in unfinished cabins, with our little children, without any one near her interested in our enterprise." The hazards and hardships which McCoy encountered on this trip were typical of numerous others made. He pushed through the wilderness over dim trails, under trees laden with snow; he slept under a bark shelter at night, or in the open; he passed through villages inhabited by drunken and unfriendly Indians; unceasingly he was handicapped by gnawing hunger; and he rode through snow and rain, weak from a burning fever.

But let's hear him tell of his hardships: "The weather was extremely cold, and we had found much difficulty in crossing streams of water, on account of the ice. White River we once crossed upon the ice, on a dark night. I had been unwell two days, when at our camp on the 20th I became quite sick. I left camp on the 21st with considerable fever, and travelled in pain all day, and still became worse. We lost our way, and I spent another painful night on the frozen ground, with the additional anxiety attendant on the circumstances of not knowing the right way. About ten o'clock the following day we recovered the small path. My fever, attended with delirium, increased until I was scarcely able to sit upon my horse. Had I not reached home on that day, I must have been carried thither in a litter, or have remained in the woods. The Lord knew how far I was from home, and said to my afflictions, 'Hither shalt thou come, but no farther.' I found my wife almost blind from sore eyes; still the Lord had been round about the family, during a time which had been lonely enough."

A short time later McCoy conferred with Agent Johnson of the Shawnees and Miamies and agreed to set up a mission on the Wabash. Johnson was to meet him the following May and assist in the building of the houses, but before the new spring had come, he had been superseded by a new agent and the mission was not built.

On January 1, 1819, Rev. and Mrs. McCoy opened their small school, consisting of six pupils from the nearby white settlement and an Indian boy from the Brother-town Indians. Other Indian children were added so that by October 1 eight were in attendance. McCoy's faith was rewarded on January 9, 1819, by the arrival of Johnston Lykens, who was to serve as a teacher in the place of Martin; and also by an encouraging letter from the secretary of the Board of Missions, on November 15, stating that continued support would be given his mission. Although Lykens was not a Christian, McCoy was to have the great joy of witnessing his conversion a short time later and of baptizing him—and finally, of having him for a son-in-law.

The lives of the McCoys were to become inspiring examples for the many Indian missionaries who followed them. After their removal to the West, McCoy became the secretary to the American Indian Mission Association (Baptist supported), for which he labored as zealously as in the missionary field. He died on June 21, 1846, from an illness brought on by exposure in severe weather, and his devoted wife followed him to the grave five years later. They had literally forgotten those things that were behind and had ever pressed on toward the mark of the high calling. No two souls could better qualify for the honor of America's foremost missionaries.

The most conspicuous monument to the memory of the McCoys was the marked advance in civilization and religion of those tribes whom they served. They had found the Indiana and Illinois Indians hedged in on every side by land-hungry whites and designing whiskey peddlers. Indian villages reeked in filth and squalor, and their inhabitants were despondent, debauched, and starving without hope "of a better day. McCoy and his wife first taught them that Christ was the light of the world; then they showed them how to spin, weave, sew, clear away fields and plant corn, and the many other things necessary to advance them on the road to civilization. Obviously, there was much back-sliding, much uncertainty, as the Indians moved forward. Sometimes the missionaries were so discouraged as to feel the utter hopelessness of success, but their Christian zeal, born of hope and faith, revived them and drove them on to final success.