Circuit Riders
In Early American Methodism
http://www.gcah.org/history/circuit-riders

By Dr. Robert Simpson

John Wesley’s Methodist plan of multiple meeting places called circuits required an itinerating force of preachers. A circuit was made up of two or more local churches (sometimes referred to as societies) in early Methodism. In American Methodism circuits were sometimes referred to as a "charge." A pastor would be appointed to the charge by his bishop. During the course of a year he was expected to visit each church on the charge at least once, and possibly start some new ones. At the end of a year the pastors met with the bishop at annual conference, where they would often be appointed to new charges. A charge containing only one church was called a station. The traveling preachers responsible for caring for these societies, or local churches and stations, became known as circuit-riders, or sometimes saddlebag preachers. They traveled light, carrying their belongings and books in their saddlebags. Ranging far and wide through villages and wilderness, they preached daily or more often at any site available be it a log cabin, the local court house, a meeting house, or an outdoor forest setting. Unlike the pastors of settled denominations, these itinerating preachers were constantly on the move. Their assignment was often so large it might take them 5 or 6 weeks to cover the territory.

Brother Harwood in New Mexico, when asking how to begin his work, was told: "Get your pony shod. Then start out northward via Fort Union, Cimarron, and Red River until you meet a Methodist coming this way... thence westward and eastward until you meet other Methodist preachers coming this way. All this will be your work.... I saw at once that I had a big field."

Francis Asbury (1745-1816), the founding bishop of American Methodism, set the pace. He traveled 270,000 miles and preached 16,000 sermons as he traveled the circuits. Peter Cartwright (1785-1872) described the life of the circuit-rider. He wrote in his Autobiography: "A Methodist preacher, when he felt that God had called him to preach, instead of hunting up a college or Biblical Institute, hunted up a hardy pony, and some traveling apparatus, and with his library always at hand, namely, a Bible, Hymn book, and Discipline, he started, and with a text that never wore out nor grew stale, he cried, 'Behold, the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sin of the world.' In this way he went through storms of wind, hail, snow, and rain; climbed hills and mountains, traversed valleys, plunged through swamps, swollen streams, lay out all night, wet, weary, and hungry, held his horse by the bridle all night, or tied him to a limb, slept with his saddle blanket for a bed, his saddle-bags for a pillow. Often he slept in dirty cabins, ate roasting ears for bread, drank butter-milk for coffee; took deer or bear meat, or wild turkey, for breakfast, dinner, and supper. This was old-fashioned Methodist preacher fare and fortune."

Not only did the preacher face physical hardship, but often he endured persecution. Freeborn Garretttsen (1752-1827) wrote of his experience: "I was pursued by the wicked, knocked down, and left almost dead on the highway, my face scarred and bleeding and then imprisoned." No wonder most of these preachers died before their careers had hardly begun. Of those who died up to 1847, nearly half were less than 30 years old. Many were too worn out to travel.
What did they earn? Not much in dollars. Bishop Asbury expressed their reward when he recruited Jesse Lee, "I am going to enlist Brother Lee. What bounty? Grace here and glory hereafter, if he is faithful, will be given."

Bibliography:
Tipple, E. S. Francis Asbury, the Prophet of the Long Road. The Methodist Book Concern 1916.
Circuit riders, "bold emissaries of the cross," held a hallowed place in Methodist history and mythology. Missionary work was the hallmark of early Methodism and its first institutionalized form were the circuit riders or itinerant preachers. They were the new St. Pauls in the Methodist pantheon. Through the circuit riders, Methodists