ONE

YOUTH

Franklin and Davenport

Phineas Franklin Bresee never forgot his boyhood in the Catskill Mountains of New York. He loved the area's beauty and revisited it throughout his life.

He was born in a log cabin in rural Franklin, New York, on December 31, 1838. He lived there for one year. The cabin stood on twelve acres owned by his father, Phineas Philips Bresee. In 1840 the family moved four and a half miles to a thirty-four-acre farm, and to a house which they occupied for ten years. Bresee's formative and cherished childhood experiences occurred here. When he visited in 1907, its courteous owners threw open the house, and, he said, "We were conducted to everything reminiscent . . . the same beechtree under whose shade I rested; the same flowing spring, from whence the water still flows; the two great twin rocks upon which my sister and myself played."

Today the place is a dairy farm. The early-nineteenth-century farmhouse is still used. A beech tree stands in front. A hill is behind the house, and a large limestone slab lies in the uphill woods above the pasture. The stone, about six feet thick, was broken apart at some

ancient time, leaving a passage three or four feet wide. Phineas and Diantha, his sister, played here. The "flowing spring" still flows west.

At the farmstead, one understands Bresee's enduring appreciation for nature and the beauty of his early home. To the south, he saw the roof of his home. To the west, he saw the Ouleout River valley leading to Franklin village. Bresee's parents gave him no middle name, but he later assumed one, choosing "Franklin." For him, the name surely evoked the beauty of the farmstead and surrounding meadows and forested hills, rather than the mundane Franklin village, where he never actually lived.

Phineas's boyhood was busy with farming and school. The district school was a one-room affair about one-third mile from the farm. Spelling lessons did little for him. "I could never spell," he said in 1914. "I never knew anything about grammar." His sermon manuscripts bear this out. For two winters he attended an academy in Oneonta, six miles over the mountain and across the Susquehanna River, where he studied Latin Grammar, a little algebra, geometry, trigonometry, and other rudimentary things.

Franklin presently has over a dozen structures that date from before 1850, including a charming, turreted house of early vintage that was once the place of William Miller, a lumber merchant. Bresee spoke of Miller to E. A. Girvin:

> I always felt called to preach from the time I was born . . . I remember when I was a very little boy, that the leading man in the community, who lived right down near where the turnpike road turned off from the Ouleout road, spoke to me on the subject. He was Captain Miller, a large man with a good deal of dignity. He put his hand on my head, and said: "Now what are you going to do when you are a man?" I was too embarrassed to answer, but he asked one question after another, and he said: "You will be a minister, won't you?" And I suppose there was some response in my

face. He said: "Oh, yes; that is it. That is the noblest calling of all." And I always wondered that everybody did not know. I thought he was smart, and that he knew that I was to be a preacher.

Phineas was twelve when the family moved in 1850 to Davenport's west edge, south of Charlotte Creek. They had a good house, and, he remembered, "fine outbuildings, a wagon-house and barn, a cowhouse, a cheese and milkhouse, a cornhouse, and hoghouses, all nicely painted like a little village. The dwelling was white and all the other buildings were trimmed in white."

The Bresee properties are clearly marked on a large county map published in 1865 by Jay Gould, later known as a "robber baron." Gould's map shows the "P. P. Bresee" residence on the north side of the Davenport-Oneonta Turnpike. "School No. 15" stood across the Oneonta road, but Phineas attended little, noting: "I was getting too smart to go to a little district school, with some young woman teacher who didn't know as much about arithmetic and algebra as I did."

Instead, Phineas returned briefly to Franklin, taking his last formal schooling at Delaware Literary Institute during the 1854-55 year. Bresee turned sixteen during the term. Girvin reports that the academy was

> conducted by Doctor [George] Kerr, a man of culture, and a good teacher. The strain, however, of studying and doing farm work at the same time was too much for Phineas, and his health gave way. That was the end of his education, so far as regular attendance at school was concerned. While he attended the Franklin academy, he became very studious, and after that he spent much time in the study of Latin, Greek, and other branches.

Delaware Literary Institute was a coed preparatory school, and its religious character was central in the early years. The institute required students "to attend public worship twice every Sabbath." They were to be punctual in attending prayers, and gambling was

forbidden, along with obscene language, "all use of intoxicating drinks and frequenting grog shops . . . [or] attending balls or dancing schools." The classes included botany, astronomy, physiology, French, German, chemistry, "intellectual philosophy," and thorough work in Latin and Greek. In religion, students read Alexander's *Evidences of Christianity* and Paley's *Natural Theology*. The strong emphasis on oratory yielded twenty-seven speeches delivered at one graduation exercise.

Later Bresee was diffident about his early education, yet his sermons and writings show that he was a lifelong student with a broad knowledge of science, literature, and history. And he was frequently the prime mover in establishing colleges with goals and standards not unlike the Delaware Literary Institute.

But he always had trouble with spelling.

Phineas's Conversion

The first years on the Valley Farm were spent in hard work. Around 1854, P. P. Bresee became a partner in West Davenport's general store. Bresee was required to clerk in the store, and his schooling ended. The years were marked by major turning points for Phineas. In Davenport he professed his conversion, began preaching, and made Maria Hebbard's acquaintance. The local Methodist connection was vital for the doctrines and experiences that he always valued, and for friendships.

Methodist circuit riders entered his native Delaware County after the American Revolution. Nathan Bangs was a notable circuit rider appointed in 1808, and John, Heman, and Joseph, his brothers, also served the circuit. Rev. Charles Giles recalled that the Methodists "were flourishing in the midst of opposition; zeal and diligence were leading traits in their character. They not only believed in the doctrine of holiness, but were seeking to obtain a knowledge of it by

experience." He noted further: "The preaching, by which they were brought in to the kingdom of Christ, was not formal and lifeless, but close, alarming, pointed, and practical." Another observer noted that "religious services were held in the open air. . . . the prayers of the migratory Methodist preachers rang through the arches of the forest, as with plain words from honest hearts they knelt on the ground to intercede for their fellow men."

Methodist societies grew with the population. In 1823 John Bangs organized the Franklin "class," which met in a schoolhouse about a mile west of the village. William Gay, a Bresee neighbor, was the class leader. A Franklin Circuit with eight preaching points was organized in 1836, two years before Phineas's birth. The New York Annual Conference minutes show that the Franklin Circuit had 275 members in 1849. Methodist "constituents," inclusive of children, was potentially many times that number.

Davenport's early Methodist societies were on the same circuits as the Franklin societies. John Bangs organized the Davenport Center society no later than 1819. Elbert Osborn found a dispirited group in 1833—only one person attended his first sermon. A revival strengthened the work and a church building was erected. Among the many pastors, James W. Smith was the immediate instrument of Phineas's conversion, while Asahel Hough reappeared in Bresee's life thirty years later in Los Angeles.

E. A. Girvin recorded Bresee's conversion story: "In February, 1856, a protracted meeting was held in the little Methodist church, of which the parents of Doctor Bresee were members. The meeting was conducted by the pastor in charge, Rev. Smith. There were two pastors, and the name of the junior was George Hearn, a young Englishman, and an unmarried man." Rev. James W. Smith was received into the New York Conference on trial and appointed to the Franklin Circuit in 1849. He served the Davenport Circuit in 1855

and 1856. George Hearn trained for the British Methodist ministry near London, joined the New York Conference in 1855, and married an English girl in 1857. He served in the ministry until his death in 1894 and was known as a revival preacher throughout his ministry.

Girvin continues: "These two pastors held the meetings, and one day Brother Smith came to the store where Phineas was working and spoke a few words to him about his soul. This was the means of bringing him under conviction, and he determined before night that he would go to the meeting and seek salvation." One can visualize the surroundings. The church is "oriented" to the east, with the door at the west end. The road north from Davenport Turnpike and Charlotte Turnpike ran in front of the church and straight past the west side of the Bresee store. A simple act occurred: a concerned pastor walked the few hundred yards to the general store and spoke some loving, serious words to the seventeen-year-old clerk. Our story turns on that simple act.

Bresee's account continued: "I went and he preached. I thought he never would get through and give me a chance to go to the altar, but he did, finally, after preaching and exhorting. Nobody had been to the altar up to that time in the meeting, but he gave a chance and I went immediately and others followed."

The pattern was familiar. Methodism had retained three offices of ministry from its Anglican heritage: deacons, elders, and bishops. It also retained forms of worship from the *Book of Common Prayer*, which John Wesley abridged for American Methodists. And they still retained some of the Communion service forms, like the specific wording of the Lord's Prayer ("forgive us our trespasses") and the practice of kneeling for prayer.

Methodist churches also retained the Communion rail, even though Anglicanism's central altar table had given way in Methodism to the central pulpit. In the evangelistic patterns developed by

Charles Finney and others, the revival service had an "anxious seat" for "seekers" "under conviction" who went to the "mourner's bench" to confess their sin and profess new faith. Among Methodists, the altar rail became simply "the altar." Then the "mourner's bench"—originally a front pew—merged with the "altar rail." In the revival meeting at West Davenport, then, the goal was the conversion of sinners as they "went to the altar."

Bresee notes:

> The meeting continued until Sunday. I think this was Friday night. On Sunday, there was an old minister there from New York city, by the name of Lull. . . . he preached in the morning. After the morning service they had a classmeeting, which was the custom in those early days; and it was during that classmeeting that I was converted, and I realized that the peace of God came into my soul at that classmeeting.

Bresee's words are significant: the revival services prepared him for conversion, but his actual conversion was in the class meeting. The Methodist "classmeeting" was a time for personal testimony, soul-searching, and spiritual counsel. It was led by a layperson—a "class leader"—who faced the members and asked each in turn about his or her spiritual experience of the past week.

Bresee remembered his conversion not in terms of moral reform but in terms of acting on his life's vocation—the call to preach he had acknowledged since childhood. He told Girvin: "I at once began to try and do Christian work. My soul was filled with great intensity for doing the work of the Lord, and I began to hold prayermeetings, talk to and exhort the people, and do all I could to push along the work."

Smith issued him an exhorter's license, which, Bresee said, "I proceeded not to use." He was "bashful and modest." Smith made appointments for him to preach, but Phineas did not go. He finally consented to preach in spring 1857, knowing he would soon move to

Iowa. The appointment was for the Sunday afternoon service at the schoolhouse at "the Hemlocks," ordinarily George Hearn's responsibility. The school was about a mile from West Davenport. Bresee went there with Hearn. He "tried to preach" on Ps. 124:7—"Our soul is escaped as a bird out of the snare of the fowlers: the snare is broken, and we are escaped."

> That was my first text and my first sermon. That is the one that I told the boys about, that embraced so much, that it had in it everything I knew. I was just a boy. It began away from before the creation of the world, came down through the Garden of Eden, along down to the fall, and down through the ages to the Incarnation and Atonement, and then on through the years until the time I was born, my conversion, then on to the judgment, and on through eternity. Although I put everything in it, it was only twenty minutes long. I wondered what in the world a fellow would ever preach about at another sermon, for I had everything in that.

When he moved to Iowa a short time later, he still had only one sermon.