Offbeat Oregon: 'Uncle Joab' Powell was West's most famous pioneer preacher

By Finn J.D. John
for The Sentinel

(**Note:** *This is part 1 of a 2-part series on pioneer preacher Uncle Joab Powell*)

About halfway between Crabtree and Lacomb, tucked into the side of a gentle hill, stands an old and somewhat austere-looking little white building known as Providence Pioneer Church.

The "pioneer" part of the name is somewhat superfluous. Just one look at it suffices to tell it's an old-style church of the kind built 150 years ago by people who'd come to Oregon in covered wagons. There is no stained glass, no icons or statuary — just four simple sash windows along each side, a steep roof, a simple belltower and steeple rising from the front. Simple, but welcoming.

It's old, but it's not the original Providence Pioneer Church. That structure was built of logs back in 1854, and according to legendary Oregon pop historian Ralph Friedman, it "had an air of vigilant righteousness, as though erected by Jeremiah and maintained by avenging angels."

And, as Friedman goes on to note, that's not far from the actual truth.

There will surely never be a second Jeremiah. But the man who led the congregation of Missionary Baptists who built Providence Church may have been the closest the world has come to producing one.

Joab Powell, better known as Uncle Joab, stood over six feet tall, with a great barrel chest enclosing a pair of lungs whose capacity was already legendary when he arrived in the state via covered wagon in 1852.

Uncle Joab is probably best known in Oregon today for a sequence of political "firsts," not all of which would have met with his approval. The main ones are these: He was the first chaplain in the state Legislature, in the year Oregon became a state; and, of course, he led the lawmakers in offering up the Legislature's first prayer.

But interesting as these little factoids may or may not be, they're far from the most interesting part of Uncle Joab's story.

Joab Powell was born in 1799 in the hills of Tennessee — Claiborne County, north of Knoxville, close to the Kentucky state line. His was a Quaker family, and he was brought up in the classic manner of the plain-dressing, plain-speaking Society of Friends, bitterly opposed on Biblical grounds to the institution of slavery, the consumption of alcohol, and the treatment of black people and Indians as something other than fellow men and women.

These moral characteristics seem to have soaked deep into his bones, for when he left the Quakers and became a Missionary Baptist, he brought them with him — except for the plain-speaking part, the 1600s-style use of "thee" and "thou," which in the mid-1800s was already starting to look a bit like an affectation.

In 1817, he married Anna Beeler; and the two of them got started building a family that would, by the time they were finished, number 14 members.

Anna was a critical and usually-forgotten part of the Uncle Joab story. For one thing, Joab Powell was illiterate: he had no formal schooling at all. But he had an uncanny ability to absorb and remember information.

So Anna would read to the family from the Bible; he would absorb and memorize whole books of it; and, at Sunday services, out it would come — somewhat imperfect word-for-word, but spot-on in spirit and intent, and delivered with enthusiasm and fire.

Not surprisingly, he was promptly called into the ministry.

He had been preaching in Tennessee for six years when, in 1830, the family moved to Missouri — which was pretty much the frontier at that time — and took a 640-acre land claim, which he started in farming as a sort of side hustle. His real avocation in Missouri was, of course, as a circuit preacher, riding all over the frontier to hold services.

Anna essentially financed this avocation by managing their farm with the help of their growing brood of children.

Twenty years passed. Then the Oregon Trail opened, and the Powells, living right there in Missouri, were perfectly positioned to join the throng. They promptly did so, crossing the plains in the approved Oregon Trail fashion and taking up a land claim at the forks of the Santiam River — where Anna set up her farming operation anew with the help of her now-mostly-grown children and, in several cases, their spouses.

Immediately upon arriving, Uncle Joab joined several other members of the party — Missionary Baptists all, of course — to establish Providence Church. Then, onto his long-suffering horse he hopped, and set out into the wilderness to obey the Great Commission.

It took a stunningly short amount of time for Uncle Joab Powell to become the most famous preacher in the West. He had, as you will no doubt have gathered, that magical combination of ferocious passion and brotherly love that good Baptist preachers are known for — and he seemed to have more of both than anyone else alive. To that, add his prodigious lung capacity — it was said, only half in jest, that when he was preaching a sermon in Scio it could be heard in downtown Jefferson, ten miles away — and you can imagine what the Forces of Evil found themselves up against.

He would start off by singing a hymn — or, perhaps it would be more accurate to say, roaring one. His pitch, several sources say, was not as good as his memory; but he made up for any such deficiency with volume.

Nor did he care: He was there to save souls, not to land a spot on Team Christina.

Next he would start into a sermon, and hold the congregation spellbound. His imperfectly remembered Bible verses would come out "translated" into frontier English — which the homesteaders always related to better than they would have the original King James text.

"When he went on a preaching trip he always took one of the brethren with him," recalled his granddaughter, Rachel Arminta Peterson, in a 1939 interview with a Works Progress Administration writer. "They went two by two just as the early disciples did at Jesus' command. In many of the places where they went there was no church building, so they preached in log cabins, in schoolhouses, in court houses or out of doors under the trees. At Lebanon he often held meetings in the old Santiam Academy building. … His journeys took him south as far as California."

When Uncle Joab rode into a town, he typically would stay with a relative or friend, and then put the word out. He didn't follow a schedule; he just dropped in, preached a "sarvice," and moved on the next day to do it all again somewhere else.

"He always came unexpectedly; we never knew when he was coming," Peterson recalled. "He always spent the night with us and as soon as he came it was the business of us children to start out and notify all the neighbors that there would be preaching at Father's house that night. We children would run everywhere and by evening when the meeting began there would be a good housefull. That is the way he went all over the country."

On occasions when there wasn't a river nearby for purposes of baptism, tanks built of planks were sometimes knocked together and filled with water. Uncle Joab was a stickler for baptism, and at every service the opportunity to get "soaked and saved" had to be ready to hand.

Back at home in Linn County, Providence Church had swelled to more than 400 members — an enormous congregation for the population of Linn County at the time. And by 1859 — on the eve of Oregon's finally becoming a state — Uncle Joab was far and away the most famous clergyman in the territory.

So, naturally, when the first state Legislature convened and thoughts were turned to the need to start meetings off properly with bowed heads and folded hands, his was the first name to come to mind. An invitation was dispatched to him forthwith, offering a $30 fee for his services as the new state's first official man of God — the Chaplain of the Legislature. It was just as promptly accepted.

It became clear, though, immediately upon his arrival, that the Legislature had had no idea what sort of preacher they were hiring when they sent for him.

They would learn, the hard way, over the next few weeks. We'll talk about that, and the assorted hilarity that ensued, in next week's article.

(**Sources:** "WPA Interview: Peterson, Rachel Arminta (Powell)," a government document transcribed by Patricia Dunn in 2000 and published on the Linn County Genealogical Society Website at www.lgsoregon.org; Roadside History of Oregon, a book by Bill Gulick published in 1991 by Mountain Press; In Search of Western Oregon, a book by Ralph Friedman published in 1990 by Caxton Printers Ltd.)

Finn J.D. John teaches at Oregon State University and writes about odd tidbits of Oregon history. For details, see http://finnjohn.com. To contact him or suggest a topic: finn2@offbeatoregon.com or 541-357-2222.