

THE CIRCUIT RIDER

In the early days in Southern Michigan, settlements were far apart and preachers few in number. Most ministers had to preach from more than one pulpit. My grandfather was such a circuit rider. Every alternate Sunday, he packed saddle bags and, mounting his horse, rode to one of his other charges.

The woods through which he had to travel were thick and dark. The horse always rolled her eyes nervously from side to side and seemed to quiver with apprehension as she trotted along. Grandfather would pat her neck and say: "Easy now, Bessie, there's nothing to alarm you." The horse would calm down for a time under his soothing touch, and steady to a trot instead of a frightened gallop.

One evening my grandfather was returning late from a preaching service. When he started, there was a full moon which made riding easier, but clouds began to obscure it, and the woods became very dark indeed. Grandfather let Bess pick her own way on the narrow trail, which was barely visible.

Suddenly, way off in the distance, a long eerie howl arose in the clear air. It was answered by a similar one from the other side.

Wolves!! My grandfather felt a chill on the back of his neck and the horse stood right up on her hind legs, almost spilling her rider from the saddle. Grandfather pulled hard on the reins, leaned forward and said tensely, "Go it, Bess!"

Bess shot forward, and my grandfather had to bend low over the horse's neck to avoid being swept off by the low hanging branches above.

Another howl--then another. "They're coming closer," he thought, and urged Bess to greater speed.

Soon the howls were sounding continuously, and coming from all directions. "A pack is gathering--if I can only make the clearing!"

Bess didn't need the whip--terror drove her on.

My grandfather saw, suddenly, a great grey form running parallel to the path on his right, another on the other side. A quick glance over his shoulder revealed several behind him. He sensed their glaring eyes and dripping jaws. He had just time for a prayer, not only for himself, but for Almira and the children at home, when one of the great grey forms leaped high, missed its aim, and struck the pack sack back of the saddle. At the same moment, another attacked from the other side, fortunately only tearing off a piece of grandfather's cloak.

It was a struggle for life. The pack was now concentrated in full force, jumping, leaping, snarling. The only hope for my grandfather lay in Bess's speed, his ability to stay in the saddle above those snapping jaws, and the help of the Lord.

It seemed hours, but was probably only minutes, till the clearing was reached. The pack would not come into the open. Defeated, the cruel wolves slunk back.

My grandfather didn't wait to unsaddle the trembling horse, but hastened to the log cabin, and gasped, as the door opened, "Are you all right, Almira?"