

Sleeping Preacher of Mooresville astounded with clairvoyant powers

By Rebekah Davis

Limestone County Archivist

Rev. Sanders lay on his sickbed, where he had for weeks recuperating from a nasty fall off his horse, when suddenly he burst out laughing.

"Look at DeWitt!" he exclaimed.

His concerned friends looked around the room while he kept on laughing. There was no one there.

Finally his friend John Pruit asked him, "What was DeWitt doing?"

That's when the Rev. Constantine Blackmon Sanders began describing what he was seeing: His friend, M.B. DeWitt, straddling a wobbly fence, a bowl of custard in one hand and a sack of peas in the other, his hat blowing off, and his hair and coattails flying in the wind, as he struggled valiantly to make his way over the fence without spilling himself and the custard too.

"He's about to lose my custard after all, and I be deprived of it," Sanders said, still laughing.

Sanders' vision was as strange as it was funny. DeWitt and the fence were nearly a mile away, beyond a trail through thick woods, and Sanders had otherwise no clue that DeWitt's wife had sent him to the visit the sick preacher with sweet treat in hand.

A few minutes later, there was a knock on the door and in walked DeWitt, ready to tell the story of his near miss. But Sanders beat him to it, telling him exactly what had happened, even though he had only seen it in his clairvoyant mind's eye.

"I would have laughed at you good, DeWitt, if you had fallen off that fence!" Sanders laughed. "Didn't you stick to it? You would have spilled the custard the good woman was sending to me, but I would have been obliged to laugh at you, I was so amused."

The incident was but one of many in which Sanders, a minister at the Mooresville Brick Church in the mid-1800s, was able to see things happening in the future or miles away, speak in languages or prescribe medicine he had not studied, or see to find things that were lost, all while in a trance-like state that earned him the nickname "The Sleeping Preacher."

Sanders was born July 2, 1831, in Madison County, the seventh of 10 children. When he was 6, his father died, and from then on he worked on the family farm while harboring the dream of becoming a preacher one day. At age 20, he began to work in the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, and his studies to become an ordained minister were going well when, in the spring of 1854, he began to suffer seizures and headaches so intense that he said, "My head feels like it has opened." Sure enough, Mary Harlow reported that she could feel and see the bones of his skull separate, only to close when the seizure passed.

After this illness, he first showed signs of his unusual gifts, telling Harlow there would be a burying at the family cemetery the next day. An hour later, a man rode up and asked to bury a corpse there the next day.

For more than 20 years after that day, Sanders repeatedly had episodes in which he would fall into a trance, sometimes for months at a time, and demonstrate his strange powers, often in writing such things as Latin passages he had never studied, or in completely transcribing a sermon that was being preached many miles away. When in this state, he always signed his writings not with his name, but with "X + Y = Z," and he referred to himself as a separate entity from the Rev. Sanders, whose body he referred to as "My Casket."

And then, as suddenly as it had come, on May 5, 1876, "X + Y = Z" left Sanders. In a trance, Sanders wrote one last note signed "X + Y = Z," in which he announced he was leaving "My Casket."

"After twenty-two years of labor and suffering in and through the person of my Casket, and for many years of that time both a mystery and a reproach to others, I now come to the end of my first

engagement, and will here leave off, in part, the work until my second and last coming, at which time I will reappear to finish up the great work for which I was intended,” he wrote. He ended the note by saying, “You will often and sadly miss me, when I am gone, but you cannot realize it now... With Heaven’s benediction I will now bid you adieu.”

From then until Sanders died on April 11, 1911, he never again fell into a trance or displayed those clairvoyant powers. He spent the rest of his days preaching for the Cumberland Presbyterian Church. You can find out more about Sanders by reading “X + Y = Z, or the Sleeping Preacher” written in 1876 by Sanders’ friend George W. Mitchell of Athens. A copy of the Centennial Edition published in 1976, which includes additional documents and insights by William P. Drake is in the Limestone County Archives library.

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