

Historical Background

Ivanhoe is a small, rural, mountain community in southwestern Virginia. The upper New River Valley and Blue Ridge Mountain plateau of Virginia, where Ivanhoe is located, are part of the southern Appalachian region. The area was first explored in 1654 and later surveyed and settled in the mid-1700s. The first European settlers who came to the area were mostly English, Scotch-Irish, and German. They came to Ivanhoe by way of Pennsylvania, eastern Virginia, and North Carolina. Pushed off the plantations and Tidewater settlements, used as buffers against the Indian tribes, or simply seeking land on the frontier and in the mountains, these settlers joined with Native Americans and assimilated their ideas and practices. A fort was built in the area (Fort Chiswell), and some settlers became farmers in the fertile valleys along Cripple Creek and the New River. A small settlement developed along Painter Creek and was known as Painter Store, named for one of the leading landowner-merchant families.

This upper New River and Blue Ridge Mountain plateau area was also rich in minerals: lead, zinc, and iron ore. Lead mining began in about 1756, when the ore was discovered by Colonel John Chiswell, and the fort named for him protected the lead mines because bullets made from the ore were used in both the American Revolution and the Civil War. The settlement and the mining operation remained small and seasonal until the Norfolk and Western Railroad reached the area in 1887 and a zinc smelter was put into operation.¹ The iron-mining industry had also begun in the early 1800s, and charcoal furnaces to make iron were built up and down Cripple Creek and the New River. During the nineteenth century, seventeen furnaces, nine forges, and a nail factory were created in the area. Ivanhoe developed around and derived its name from one of these furnaces, the Ivanhoe furnace, built on the New River at the mouth of Painter Creek in 1880. What had been a small agricultural settlement became a booming center for mining iron, lead, zinc, and manganese. Ivanhoe also became the site of two of the largest industries in southwestern Virginia: National Carbide, which replaced the Ivanhoe furnace operation in 1918, and New Jersey Zinc Company, which bought the lead mines in 1901, then bought the old furnace property when National Carbide closed, and opened a large shaft in

Ivanhoe. Ivanhoe was the industrial center of the region, in contrast to the rest of the county which remained largely agricultural until the mid-1900s when manufacturing plants came south.

The lead mines and the iron ore mines and charcoal furnaces brought other settlers, largely African-American, to the area. Some of the New River farmers owned slaves who remained as local farmers or became industrial workers after the Civil War. Many more freed African Americans came to the region to work in the iron mines and furnaces. Because, it appears, all workers were paid the same, Ivanhoe became a racially and ethnically mixed community, which included a number of African American-owned businesses and houses. Some other ethnic groups came into the area with the railroads and furnaces. One large family in Ivanhoe traces its ancestry to one Italian immigrant.

At its height in the 1940s, Ivanhoe had around forty-five hundred residents of various racial and ethnic background. It had a school, a railroad, a hotel, stores, a theater, a doctor, six or seven churches, and a restaurant. Now Ivanhoe has about thirteen hundred residents. The school, stores, theater, some of the churches, and the railroad are all gone. By the 1980s, employment opportunities were very limited. Those who found work after the factories and mines closed commuted an average of sixty-three miles to jobs with lower pay and fewer benefits.

Political and Religious History

The frontier settlement around the lead mines was a backwoods rebel community, and some of these early settlers were not only outspoken rebels but produced the Fincastle Resolutions, a statement with strong sentiments for liberty that predated the Declaration of Independence. The frontier also held a large contingent who supported the British cause and aligned themselves with the Indians. These stances caused the people in the area that was to include Ivanhoe to be labeled "insurrectionary" during the revolutionary war. The area was a place of considerable conflict and unrest, and the lead mines became a fortress. Many were arrested and forced by the militia to work the mines. The region was also an area of conflict during the Civil War, and the inhabitants were strongly divided between Union supporters in the uplands and secessionists (led by the few large plantation owners) in the wider valleys. This division can be seen even today, between the up-country, mountain Republicans and the valley Democrats or between the upper New River "backwoods" residents and the more urban valley residents who comprise the economic and political elite.²

The religious-cultural background of the European settlers—largely Calvinistic, with stress on the Bible and preaching the word in a free and democratic congregational setting—supported a dissenting ethos. The frontier and mountain experience also included respect for nature and the supernatural world. A world of kinship and friendship combined with these experiences into a some-

what distinct “mountain religion” not necessarily tied to organized institutions.³ Before any churches were built, the early settlers relied on family Bible reading, usually at night after supper. The Bible was the only book that many people owned. Circuit-riding preachers came through occasionally, stopping to hold services in people’s homes, beside the river, or in any building that would serve the purpose. Weddings, baptisms, and funerals were performed whenever there was a preacher in the area. Funerals were held sometimes months after the burying; the relatives waited until a preacher arrived or until friends and family could attend. This was common until the late nineteenth century.

Camp Meetings

Many German settlers founded Lutheran churches in the valleys, and Episcopal and Presbyterian churches were developed in the larger valley settlements. But the first Christian denomination over the mountain in the Ivanhoe area was Methodist, stemming from the visit of Bishop Francis Asbury (1745–1816) to Wythe County in 1788 to “encourage congregations in the wilderness.” Asbury Campground was developed after his visit, and camp meetings became very popular in the 1800s. They were usually held in the late summer when crops were laid by and before the fall harvest began. They were a big part of the social life of the scattered, isolated families, and the Cripple Creek and Asbury camp meetings attracted people from the Ivanhoe area. People camped out or built “tents,” which sometimes became relatively elaborate structures, to live in during the meetings.

Camp meetings continued to be important when the mining camps were developed. Tom Goodson, whose family moved from North Carolina to work at the Ivanhoe furnace, reminisced about his camp-meeting experience: “I’ve attended all kinds of old camp meetings. We used to ride the train up there and stay all night and come back the next day. They were Methodist. Back then they sung with the men on one side and the women on the other side. Every one of them had something tied around their head. They was running them mines up there then, these coal and iron ore furnaces all around it.”⁴

Early Methodist Churches in Ivanhoe

Olive Branch Church was the first Methodist church in the Ivanhoe area (it was organized in 1833, located at Porter Crossroads, and is still in operation). A second church, and the first church to be built in downtown Ivanhoe, was Forest Methodist. Built on “Church Hill,” it began as an interdenominational church, known first as the Cripple Creek Church. In 1870 it was deeded to the Methodist Episcopal Church South by a group of men who represented the major families in the valley and were the leaders of the community. Most were farmers, but some had joined the northern capitalists who came to develop the

furnaces and the mining industry. Forest Methodist church and a small Episcopal mission church served the older, landed families and the new owners and operators of the industries. When the industries left, many of these families also left, and the churches they supported declined or changed with the changing population.

A third Methodist church, the Fairview United Methodist Church, was established in 1894 as a result of a revival meeting held in a grove in the part of Ivanhoe called Rakestown. The meeting's evangelist was the famous preacher Robert S. Sheffey, who was born in Ivanhoe and later placed a curse on the town. Forest Methodist and Fairview used to be in the same Methodist conference, along with Austinville (where the lead mines were located). Together these churches were known as "the Lead Mines Circuit," and Sheffey was perhaps the best known of the lead mines' circuit riders. Although technically located in Ivanhoe, today these churches are in different counties (Wythe and Carroll) and, as a result, belong to different Methodist conferences and have different ministers.

The "Little Yellow Church"

When the Ivanhoe furnace and National Carbide were operating, some Episcopal deaconesses came to the town as missionaries to provide Sunday school and work with the women and children. This followed the typical pattern of the missionary efforts practiced by mainline denominations serving the mining regions at the turn of the century. St. Andrew's was established in Ivanhoe as a small mission of the Episcopal parish in Wytheville, St. John's. Referred to by Ivanhoe townspeople as the "Little Yellow Church," it was located on Branch Row among the row houses built by the furnace to house its workers. The houses (which were continued under the ownership of National Carbide), as well as the church, were torn down by New Jersey Zinc when that company bought the furnace property.

The rector of St. John's Episcopal Church in Wytheville would come to St. Andrew's once a month to hold services for the elite owners and operators. Diocesan reports in the 1940s listed twenty communicants, eight families, and eighty-one pupils in the church school. St. Andrew's held Sunday school in the afternoon and almost every child in Ivanhoe attended. Some went to the other churches in the mornings and then to the Little Yellow Church on Sunday afternoon. There are many good memories of the church, the deaconesses, and a British woman, Mrs. Gladys Frye, who was the church school superintendent for many years.

Because the chapel served both the local community and the congregation (made up of industry leaders and local elites), there was conflict from the beginning about the role of the church and whether it was to serve the community of nonmembers or the small, elite congregation. There seems to be no doubt,

however, about the fondness that Ivanhoe residents had for the Little Yellow Church, as the following reminiscences make evident:

Geneva Waller A lot of people around here went to the little yellow Episcopal church. . . . Miss Frye was the teacher. Miss Minnie Pope taught Sunday school. We all went there. Of course, we went to the Methodist church too. They had Sunday school there in the evenings and we would go to the Methodist church in the morning and there in the evenings. These big churches would send all these things here and these women would bring them over. On Wednesday we would have sewing classes. They would come over here and bring all kinds of nice things for us to embroider. They taught us to embroider curtains, scarfs, and then when we made them they gave them to us. At Christmas we would have the nicest gifts. The prettiest doll I think I ever had I got for perfect attendance; it was a china head doll dressed so pretty. They would give us different prizes.

Dot Walke I was born on Branch Row. There were a lot of houses and a church, a little yellow church. It had little round tables in it like kindergarten. I remember my feet wouldn't touch the floor because I was so short. I went there to Sunday school.⁷

Mission Controversy

The controversy over the Little Yellow Church in the Episcopal community reveals the differing conceptions concerning the role and mission of the church in a community such as Ivanhoe that were present even fifty years ago. Should mainline church presence in Ivanhoe exist as an outreach "mission," offering service to the people of the community (regardless of whether they were church members)? Or should the church be there to serve its own members (in this case, the baptized Episcopalians, a group that comprised only a few of the leading families in the community)? In 1922, Matilda Treat was deaconess at the Little Yellow Church. Apparently she was criticized by regular congregation members for being too much of a "social worker," rather than a religious worker. The bishop wrote to her reporting the criticism he had received; she replied on January 29, 1922, by resigning. She explained that her only "social work" had been taking an insane woman to the hospital and that she considered the work she did in the community to be "religious." She said:

I have never been any place where there was more need of work. From the beginning I found that they did not want the work there. I mean the Episcopalians (with the exception of two or three). . . . Perhaps the destructive criticism that comes from Ivanhoe is accounted for by the fact that their personal life is such that they keep away personal criticism [by criticizing] me and my work. I am sorry you do not know

the personnel of the Ivanhoe people, it is truly unique, caused perhaps by lack of law and education. [Signed] Matilda Agnes Treat.⁶

When National Carbide closed, New Jersey Zinc bought their property and also bought the church and demolished it. The impact on the community was powerful. Many people still speak with sorrow and regret about the tearing down of the Little Yellow Church. Geneva Waller explains:

They [the deaconesses] meant a lot to the community. There wasn't a lot of Episcopal children in Ivanhoe, but children from all the churches went. These women would bring their car and it had a running board on it and we would ride on that running board to the top of Painter Hill and back, just to get to ride up there. The Austinville Company bought that little church and tore it down. The Huddles went there. There weren't more than 10 or 12 families that went to it. They were still having services there when they sold it. There weren't too many people because some of the people moved from Ivanhoe to other places.⁷

Osa Price remembers when New Jersey Zinc tore down the church:

I remember how sad I was when they started tearing down the Episcopal Church. They had a light down there in it, and I was in my kitchen window washing dishes. Somebody, I guess, had bought it and was in a hurry to get it down. They had taken enough of it down until it was just a light in there showing the frame of it. I stood there at my kitchen window and cried because it made such an awful impression on me. I thought—tearing down a church! I believe it had stained glass windows in it. I don't know what they did with those.⁸

Pentecostal and Independent Churches

In the early part of the twentieth century, C. J. ("Lum") Lawson, a leading merchant-businessman in Ivanhoe, built a Baptist church on Church Hill and preached there. After his death, the first Pentecostal church, the Ivanhoe Pentecostal Holiness Church, was formed on this site in 1919. This church and the Church of God of Prophecy are the two Pentecostal churches in town, both located on Church Hill. The Church of God of Prophecy was originally a black school and lodge but operates today as an integrated church. King's Chapel Church, one of the newer Pentecostal churches, located outside town, was established as an independent church in 1952. Members say that it was established for people in the community who did not attend any other church. As the