**The Warrior From Rock Creek**

**F. B. SRYGLEY’S ALABAMA ROOTS**

When Filo Bunyan Srygley died in a Nashville hospital on Sunday morning, February 11, 1940, H. Leo Boles said: “It will be a long time before, if ever, there arises among us another such man as F. B. Srygley…. No man living today can claim greater loyalty to the church ... He has fought more battles for the truth of God, won more victories over error and false teachings than any man now living…. No man has sacrificed more time from home and family for the cause of Christ than Brother Srygley. No one has endured more hardships, suffered more bitter persecution, and been slandered more than has he. Those who read his editorials can bear testimony that he waged a relentless warfare against every encroachment on the truth of God and against the enemies of the church of the Lord.” (*Gospel Advocate,* Feb. 15, 1940.)

Srygley was a consummate warrior for divine truth. He opposed carnal warfare, but believed a preacher must be “a good soldier of Jesus Christ.” This aspect of his life was noted by contemporaries. B. C. Goodpasture said: “He never declined to labor in any field because it was hard; he never refused to meet any opponent because he was strong. Like old John Knox, he never feared the face of man. He was loyal to Christ first, last, and all the time. He would not wink at error in the practice of anyone, not even his most intimate friends.” (Ibid., May 23, 1940.)

However, Srygley was not a warrior without purpose, skill, equilibrium, and integrity. W. E. Brightwell said: “The basic traits that make men natural, and therefore great, were his. His cheerfulness was incurable and contagious. His sense of humor, coupled with common sense and humility, created an atmosphere favorable to balance and sane evaluation, and one in which fanaticism, egotism, and pretense cannot thrive.” His influence on Christians was enormous. C. R. Nichol said: “Before I tried to preach I heard him say: ‘I endorse Jesus Christ and the apostles, but I tie my faith to no mere man; no man is authority for me in religion.’ Possibly that statement from him so reacted on me that I have never quoted a word from Alexander Campbell or David Lipscomb in writing or preaching.” (Ibid.)

Although continually engaged in verbal combat, Srygley was not characterized by anger, malice, or bitterness; nor did he nurse grudges. John T. Lewis, who had some “warm arguments” with him, wrote: “Paul says: ‘Brethren, be not children in mind: yet in malice be ye babes, but in mind be men.’ This verse … was demonstrated in Brother Srygley’s life. He would fight you one minute and eat with you the next.’” (Ibid.)

**The Relevance of F. B. Srygley**

# In the first half of the twentieth century, F. B. Srygley was respected in thousands of homes where the *Gospel Advocate* was read. But nearly seventy years after his death, few Christians know much about his life and work. He wrote no books that might have kept his name alive. Restoration histories give him scant notice, if any at all. He had no connection with a Bible college where he might have influenced students as a beloved teacher. He served no large church that could provide publicity. In fact, he did no “located work,” but preached in meetings mostly in rural areas, small towns, and mission fields. What relevance, then, could he have to Christians today?

Doctrinally and temperamentally, Srygley would not fit comfortably in most of our churches today. He may have a closer affinity with our more conservative churches, but he would not feel welcome in many of these. Harry Pickup, Sr., who knew him well, said: “If I have ever known a man who ‘wore no man’s collar,’ it was this man.” (Melvin Curry, ed., *They Being Dead Yet Speak,* 193.) One could not long dwell on Srygley’s life without being influenced by his way of thinking. J. D. Boyd, said: “I have read from Brother Srygley since I was a boy, and it seems to me that he came as near being always right as any writer for religious papers.” (*Advocate,* Mar. 28, 1940.)

Srygley’s life spanned eighty years, from the eve of the Civil War until the brink of World War II. He began preaching before our first major division was final. He was active in that controversy and in all controversies that helped define churches of Christ during the twentieth century. His relevance to us rests on several facets of his distinctive and captivating life. But neither time nor purpose permits discussing these now. The emphasis here is on the Alabama influences that made him a great preacher. However, a brief notice of three facts will help place him in historical context, as a quintessential exponent of the apostolic order.

First, Srygley is a *significant link* between the original pioneer restor-ers and their twentieth century successors. He was seven when Alexander Campbell died and *he* died seven years before I entered college. “Raccoon” John Smith, Samuel Rogers, and Walter Scott were yet living when he was born. Thomas Campbell had been dead only five years and Barton Stone fif-teen. Jacob Creath, Jr. was still preaching when Srygley began his ministry in 1880. So he is a remarkable representative of the faithful preachers whose life spanned the time from Alexander Campbell to B. C. Goodpasture.

Second, Srygley was an *explicit channel* of the conservative tradition of Campbell in the *Christian Baptist.*He was a conserver of the restoration ideal in Thomas Campbell’s declaration: “Where the Scriptures speak, we speak; and where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent.” Lin D. Cartwright said: “It was through [the *Christian Baptist*] that [Campbell] hammered out most of the cardinal ideas which were to determine the course of the Disciples for a century to come…. True, Campbell later changed his spirit and many of his viewpoints … still the core of his contentions … contains to this day the major determining concepts around which the movement revolves.” (Lin D. Cartwright, *The Influence of the Religious Journal*, 4-5. An Unpublished Manuscript.)

Srygley was an advocate of the conservatism of Tolbert Fanning and David Lipscomb in the South and Benjamin Franklin and Daniel Sommer in the North. No man in his time was more zealous for the accurate order of the old paths than F. B. Srygley.He committed himself completely and resolutely to apostolic authority; and in his zeal for the Scriptures, he sought to passionately guard the perimeters of the ancient order.

Third, Srygley’s writings in the *Gospel Advocate* touched most *contemporary controversies* among Restoration churches. A compendium of his work would cover the major issues before the church in his lifetime. The wide range of topics on which he wrote was prompted by letters, postcards, and clippings from various sources requesting his comments. He also drew items from many religious papers on which to launch his robust editorials. Few things escaped his eagle eye, quick mind, and ready pen.

Srygley loved to counsel, whether requested or volunteered. When a friend asked for advice, he said: “When a man comes to me like that, he touches a weak point in my nature. It is a compliment that makes most of us purr like a house cat dozing before a warm fire on a long winter night.” (*Advocate*, Jan. 26, 1939.) He understood the role that circumstances, disposition, and aptitude assigned him. He liked to explain Scriptures, answer critics, and solve problems. He relished the give and take of a verbal tussle. He saw a need for controversy. His lot was to fill that niche and he did it well. However, he managed to keep in good humor, to make his words sparkle with wit, and never to allow himself to become dogmatic.

Srygley’s first article in the *Advocate* was published while he was in college. He became a contributor in about 1885, and was added to the editorial staff in 1924. These things show his historical value, but now attention is now given to the formative years of his childhood and youth among the rugged mountains of Northwest Alabama.

**The Alabama Roots of F. B. Srygley**

Filo Srygley was a native of Rock Creek, Alabama, a place for which he shared the sentiment of his brother who said: “It was my home, and is still dearer to me than any other spot on the globe. I am not ashamed of the place, nor the people. Railroads and other modern improvements … have [brought changes]. Some … are for the better; but who shall say that not one of them is for the worse.... How many times in the dark and dreary trials of life since I left those blessed scenes of my childhood, would I have given worlds … to exchange the scholarly words of consolation and encourage-ment, spoken in rounded periods and well modulated voices, for the homely language of sympathy and love fresh from the guileless hearts of those oldtime folks.” (F. D. Srygley, *Smiles and Tears*, 28.)

It was along the unpretentious little mountain stream called Rock Creek that significant forces merged to mold F. B. Srygley into the devout Christian, distinguished evangelist, and notable contender for the faith that he became. Attention is given to some things that Srygley himself regarded as salient influences of his early life.

The first of these embrace his family and community. F. B. Srygley was born in Franklin (now Colbert) County, September 10, 1859, to James Hall and Sarah Jane Srygley. His Srygley forbearers came from Hampshire, England, in 1759, and he was related by marriage to old Ben Franklin of Philadelphia. George Washington Srygley, his grandfather, married Mary Wallace in 1818, and their third son was F.B. Srygley’s father. George moved to Lawrence County at the time of Alabama statehood, when the land opened for settlement. Srygley’s parents were born in Lawrence County.

His mother was only thirteen when she married and his father but a little older. They settled at Rock Creek soon after their wedding. James hewed the logs and built the cabin where they raised a family of five boys and four girls. In 1887, most of the Srygley clan migrated to Coal Hill, Arkansas, where Felix Srygley was a railroad land agent and where Fletcher wrote “Larimore and His Boys” while suffering a debilitating illness.

Before James Srygley could clear his land for farming, he worked on a plantation in the Tennessee Valley, twenty miles from his cabin in the mountains. He split rails for fifty cents a hundred. He camped in the woods from Monday till Saturday and walked home for one day. He chopped firewood all day Sunday and stacked it by his cabin door for his wife to burn during the week. Then, after supper, he walked through the woods back to his camp in the river bottoms for another week of labor.

Sarah worked as hard as her husband—with cards, wheel, and loom— making clothes for her little family. Every night wolves howled and panthers screamed around the cabin, and often she would not see a soul in human shape, except her own helpless children, for days at a time. Edgar Srygley said: “I have heard my relatives say that James would come home from a week’s absence splitting rails and find his young wife playing with her dolls.” (Curry, *They Being Dead,* 189.) .

James and Sarah Srygley instilled in their children principles of industry, economy, and self-reliance. James was respected for miles around Rock Creek, and although poor, the only limit to his credit was what he imposed. “He was especially liberal in … supporting preachers and schools ... He was also noted for the frequency and liberality of his gifts from the products of his little farm to help the poor, and especially the widows and orphans of the community. He delighted to entertain company, and during protracted meetings and other public gatherings invited everybody home with him, and literally ‘skinned the place’ to feed people and horses.” (F. D. Srygley, *Biographies and Sermons,* 67.)

The Civil War left an impact on Srygley and he often referred to it. The war clouds gathering over the nation when he was born did not affect the people around Rock Creek at first. The possibility of war seemed remote to those plain folks. “By 1860 a rather distinctive lifestyle had emerged in Franklin County. This way of life was rural, home and family centered and highly self-sufficient. The perpetual loneliness bred an appreciation for neighbors, friends and relatives…. A strong spirit of individualism developed and was matched with an acceptance of others on equal terms…. The announcement of a Saturday night frolic, a religious revival or some other community activity created far more excitement than more historic events such as the Dred Scott decision by the Supreme Court, the Lincoln-Douglas debates, or the raid on Harper’s Ferry…. The people … weren’t unaware of the growing sectionalism in the United States or the threat of Southern secession and the possibility of a Civil War. Yet as the clouds of war became ominous, they did not show a great deal of concern. The vast majority of the people of Franklin County preferred to remain undisturbed in their struggle for a better life. This would however prove impossible.” (Richie Hester, *Forefathers of Franklin County*, 32-33.)

Soon after his seventy-eighth birthday, Srygley wrote: “The first thing that I remember was the battle of Shiloh. We could hear the cannons roar on that battlefield…. The family was on the front porch in the old home …. I remember being helped up on the banisters that surrounded the front of the house. I held to one of the posts … and one of my elder sisters helped me to stand steadily on the banisters. It must have been about the time that General Johntson was shot in the leg and bled to death on the battlefield … It was perhaps better that the Confederates lost the victory … at Shiloh, because it could not have changed the final result of the war, but it might have prolonged the bloody struggle for a time. The sooner the war ends the better, for in the end both sides lose.” (*Advocate,* Sept. 23, 1937.)

“I remember another thing,” Srygley added, “and that was when my oldest brother was eighteen and had to go to the war. A neighbor boy, Billy Canaday [Kennedy], was in the same company ... In a small battle near Decatur, Ala., a cannon ball went through a barn behind which he and another neighbor boy had gone for shelter and cut Billy’s head off. They put the body in a square box and sent it home for burial. They said that he was still in his Confederate uniform, with his cavalry spurs still on his boots. The box was not opened, but his war-torn body was buried in Rock Creek burial ground. I can remember that sad burial. This only served to make us more uneasy about our oldest brother.”

“Soon after this a large number of Confederate cavalrymen passed our home going North. We were at the well, and the two older boys drew water and handed it in a large gourd to those who stopped for it. I stood at the gate to keep the stock in the yard. One nice-looking young man stopped for water and said to me: ‘Howdy, Bud.’ I said: ‘I am not Bud.’ My eyes filled with tears, and I explained that Bud had gone to the war.” (Ibid., Sept. 23, 1937.)

Thousands died in the war and many more maimed for life. The land was soon filled with widows and orphans of war and veterans with severed limbs and worse. But the Srygley’s were fortunate in the safe return of their son and brother. Srygley said: “When the South surrendered, Bud came home, arriving late at night, and he went to bed in my mother’s room. When I got up, my mother said: ‘Bud got home this morning.’ I slipped to the door and looked at him as he slept, and I thought he was the finest looking young man I had ever seen. I never thought after he went to the war that I would ever see him again. I remember [Gen. John B.] Hood’s wagon train as they drove through our place. They tore the fence down at the northeast part of our place, and left the muddy road…. I watched them another half day as they passed.” (Ibid.)

But far more important than the war was the influence of the Rock Creek church established by John Taylor after the war. There Srygley learned the plan of salvation that he later preached to the saving of thousands. Next to his family, he regarded the Rock Creek church as the greatest influence on his life. James and Sarah Srygley were not Christians when they settled at Rock Creek. Sarah came from Presbyterian stock, but James had family roots in the Restoration.

“According to an old church record … the church at Rock Creek was organized on June 14, 1868. Charter members [eight in number] included the parents of F. B. Srygley …” (Curry, *They Being Dead*, 189.) Srygley’s parents were baptized at Frankfort in 1866, where they worshiped before the Rock Creek church began. Before Srygley’s father became a Christian, he was the “moderator” of a debate at Frankfort between John Taylor and a Baptist preacher. That debate was soon followed by another, which was also attended by Srygley’s father. Srygley said: “My father was so impressed with the truth on the design of baptism by these debates that … he became obedient to the gospel.” (*Advocate*, May 8, 1930.)

It was at Rock Creek that Srygley came under the influence of four pioneer preachers of Northwest Alabama: John Taylor, James M. Pickens, T. B. Larimore, and Joseph H. Halbrook. The first of these was John Taylor, who began a restoration movement in establishing the first church of Christ in Fayette County in 1829. He then had not heard of the Restoration, knew no preacher who believed as did he, and knew of no church that followed the Bible alone. Taylor’s life in the backwoods of Northwest Alabama itself is one of the most exhilarating chapters in all Restoration history.

Srygley said: “Brother Taylor was the first real, straightforward gospel preacher I remember to have heard preach the gospel unmixed by human error … Brother Taylor had no education from any school or college; but still looking back at his life now, I cannot say he was without an education. He knew humanity. He learned from nature. But, best of all, he knew the Bible. He was a logician, though he perhaps never saw a book of logic. He was a good reader, especially in reading the Bible to the public. He was a good speaker, yet he knew nothing about elocution. His illustrations were simple, and yet they … fitly illustrated the point at issue. Children as well as older people could understand him. He was a good debater, and he never failed to come to the defense of the truth when called upon…. He truly labored with, and for, the poor. He lived among, and was at home with, the poorest.” (Ibid., Dec. 3, 1936.)

It was with John Taylor that Larimore began preaching in Northwest Alabama, making his first preaching tour through that country with him on foot. It was also with Taylor that F. D. and F. B. Srygley did their first preaching. F. D. Srygley describes at length experiences in traveling with John Taylor on preaching tours in Northwest Alabama. And F. B. Srygley often referred to his relation with Taylor in the beginning of his ministry.

Another Christian who influenced Srygley was James M. Pickens. A native of Tennessee, Pickens moved to Mountain Home in Lawrence County at the close of the Civil War. Mountain Home was forty-five beeline miles from Rock Creek. Pickens was about thirty at the time, and already a preach-er of experience and exceptional ability. Except for a brief time, he remained at Mountain Home until his tragic death in 1881, when he was forty-five and ready to do what may have been his greatest work. Pickens was the most important single force after the Civil War in gathering the remnants of the scattered churches in Northwest Alabama, restoring them to divine service, and sustaining them through the nine years of Reconstruction.

The church at Frankfort ceased meeting during the war, but was revived by Pickens in 1866 with forty-two members. That was when Srygley’s parents were baptized. In 1868, Pickens started a school at Mountain Home. It was a private academy, not a “Bible school” or a “church school.” It was through the influence of R. B. Trimble, a pioneer preacher of Tennessee, that T. B. Larimore went to Mountain Home in 1868 to teach in Picken’s school. This was after he graduated from Franklin College. Trimble is also the man who encouraged and helped Larimore to begin preaching.

In the summer of 1868, Larimore made his first preaching tour through the mountains of Northwest Alabama with John Taylor. He remained at Mountain Home until 1869, but left the school because it had insufficient students to support his continuing. However, it was Larimore’s association with Pickens at Mountain Home that gave him the idea of Mars’ Hill Academy, which he founded near Florence in 1870. In addition to operating a school and preaching throughout Northwest Alabama, in 1870 Pickens began *The Christian Monthly*, changed to *The Southern Christian Weekly* in 1872. David Lipscomb wrote of the *Weekly*: “We have not seen a sounder or more pointed paper on the subjects it discusses.” (Ibid., June 2, 1870.)

Srygley always respected Pickens. In 1931, he said: “He was a great man and a great debater. He debated with Dr. [Jacob] Ditzler and published the debate in his paper. When only a child, I read this debate with great interest and profit. Though young, I was able to see that Dr. Ditzler had his hands full.” (Ibid., Nov. 12, 1931.) Ditzler was a Methodist whom H. Leo Boles called “the giant defender of Methodism.” Pickens debated him at McKendree Chapel in Morgan County in 1873. The “doughty” doctor, whom Jesse T. Woods called a “braggard,” not thinking he would find such a man as Pickens in the mountains of Northwest Alabama, “had expected an easy victory, but was doubtless as badly disappointed as in any debates he ever had, for Pickens picked him all to pieces.” (B. F. Manire, *Reminiscences of Preachers and Churches in Mississippi*, 40.)

Pickens probably did more than any man at the time to get the Restoration plea before the public in an intelligent and respectable manner through preaching, writing, and debating. In 1880, he became a candidate for governor of Alabama on the Greenback-Labor Party ticket. He was swamped by the Democrat candidate in the year James A. Garfield was elected president. Later references in the *Gospel Advocate*, implying that he ceased preaching after he “got mixed up in politics,” are erroneous. His death came at the hands of an assassin by whom he was “wantonly murdered in the spring of 1881 in broad daylight, and within sight of his own house.” (Ibid., 41). Picken’s son, in a letter to Richard L. James, said: “He was killed in 1881, trying to stop a quarrel between two neighbors.” (James M. Pickens Collection, Disciples of Christ Historical Society.) He tried to wrestle a gun from a man waiting in ambush to kill a man with whom he was walking.

Srygley was baptized by Joseph H. Halbrook in Rock Creek on his father’s farm August 26, 1876, when he was sixteen. Halbrook was a pioneer preacher of Northwest Alabama in the later decades of the 1800s. He moved to Florida in 1896, where he spent his last years. While Halbrook baptized Srygley, he credited his conversion to John Taylor. He said: “I have never done anything that I know of to make me a Campbellite; but if I have, I did not go to do it. It was purely an accident. I was not even led into the true teaching by that route at all. John Taylor, who [taught me the truth] … learned the truth himself, not knowing at [that] time that such a man as Campbell lived.” (*Advocate*,Feb. 17, 1938.)

The most extensive influence on Srygley, outside of his family, was T. B. Larimore. He said: “Next to my father and mother, I owe more to T. B. Larimore than any person my life ever touched.” (Ibid., Mar. 16, 1929.) It was through John Taylor that Larimore first came to Rock Creek. F. D. Srygley said: “Old brother John Taylor had announced beforehand that the stranger was a young man just out of College, an eloquent speaker, a learned man and a mighty preacher. Now it was something unusual for a college preacher to visit Rock Creek and many of the congregation had perhaps never seen a genuine graduate from college.” (Srygley, *Smiles*, 29.)

F. B. Srygley recalled Larimore’s first preaching at Rock Creek. “It was in July, 1868. I remember this preaching very well myself, though I was less than nine years old at the time. I remember how strange the preacher looked at the time. His head was closely shaven, and I thought that he had white hair, if he ever had any. He went into a barber shop in Tuscumbia to have his hair cut, and the barber, as he thought, played a prank on him by shaving his head.... He seemed to feel that it was his duty to submit to this, and he did it without a word of complaint.” (*Advocate*, Sept. 29, 1938.)

“The first impression of the entire congregation after ‘sizing him up,’” Srygley said, “was unconcealed disappointment. There was nothing in his dress or outward appearance to distinguish him from common preachers of that country … he looked both green and awkward.” Larimore came to Tuscumbia by train and left on foot when he caught a ride in a buggy going his way. “About nightfall, however, their ways parted, and he was set out … at the forks of the road alone in a strange country. It was a desolate spot, no signs of human habitation in sight; but towering mountains, rugged cliffs and dark deep ravines all around him. Fortunately his baggage was not cumbersome, consisting only of a plain cheap Bible, an extra shirt and a paper collar! He walked on till he came to the humble home of good old brother Taylor, who received him with joy and gave him genuine Christian entertainment for the night in the very best style his poor home could afford. The next day he met the anxious and curios congregation at Rock Creek and began his first meeting of much importance.” (Srygley, *Smiles*, 29-31.)

Srygley continued: “We never had heard such preaching as he did. He was naturally timid, but eloquent and persuasive in his manner, and we felt like he came from ‘a different world’ from the one he was in then…. We were the happiest bunch that ever left a meeting in that country, so far as I know. Perhaps this man Larimore and this meeting had more to do with the shaping of the work of my life than anything that happened to me in boyhood days. Larimore came to that country in 1868 to get pupils for … Pickens’ school at Mountain Home…. While Larimore came for that purpose, who could say that God did not have a greater motive for his coming than Larimore himself had? So far as its influence upon me is concerned, I prefer to believe that it was providential. The course of my life was changed, I am sure, for the better. I give God the praise for that visit of that servant of his.” (*Advocate*, Sept. 29, 1938.)

Srygley attended Mars’ Hill College three years where he came more intensely under Larimore’s influence. There is not time tell about that, but Larimore is so well known that it is not hard to envision. After graduating from Mars’ Hill, Srygley took a six weeks’ journey with John Taylor through the mountains of Northwest Alabama, where he preached sixty times and baptized sixty people. Taylor took sick on that journey and died three years later. It was on that trip that Srygley learned about the work of Taylor in establishing the first church of Christ in Fayette County in 1829. The next year Srygley moved to Tennessee, where he became, as Terry Gardner said, “an outstanding debater, an excellent preacher, and a fine writer,”

**An Enduring Legacy**

Some preachers are remembered only in their lifetime. Others a while after their demise. But a few deserve to be remembered for generations. F. B. Srygley belongs to this class. With his death in 1940, one of the greatest fighters for truth and right in modern spiritual warfare, the fearless warrior from Rock Creek, was on earth no more. He left on his desk in the *Advocate* office an unfinished article about thoughts. We do no know what he would have written, but he planned to use Philippians 4:8 as an anchor. It is fitting that a paper on this old soldier of the cross should end with this verse. It epitomizes the thinking of the man and the legacy he leaves to us today. “Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honorable, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.’” (Phil. 4:8.)

Earl Kimbrough, March 2008.