

Druillard, Phebe Helen “Nellie” (Rankin) (1845–1937)

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Adventist missionary and philanthropist Phebe Helen Rankin Druillard¹, known as Nellie, was an administrator, treasurer, and founder of institutions.

Early Years

Nellie Rankin was born on December 1, 1845,² in Watertown, Wisconsin, to Alexander (1814-1897) and Lydia (1824-1898) Rankin, who in the late 1840s accepted the Sabbatarian Adventist message.³ Early in Nellie's life, her parents moved to Oxford, Nebraska, where they were considered "old Sabbath-keepers from Wisconsin," who "might be regarded almost as pioneers."⁴ Nellie graduated from Wisconsin State Normal [Teaching] College after which she served as a teacher in schools in Wisconsin and Nebraska.⁵ She eventually became the county superintendent of public schools for several years in Furnas County, Nebraska.⁶

Alma Drouillard (after 1888 he would spell his name as Druillard) was born August 14, 1835, to John (1788-1865) and Rebecca (1801-1879).⁷ The Drouillards accepted the Adventist message through the evangelistic efforts of Isaac Sanborn in the late 1860s. Nellie married Alma, a successful businessman, on August 13, 1884, in Denver, Colorado.⁸ Alma's first wife, Eliza (1837-1883), had died from tuberculosis while they lived in Lincoln, Nebraska.⁹



Nellie Helen Rankin Druillard

Photo courtesy of Center for Adventist Research.

In 1884 Nellie was appointed treasurer of the Colorado Conference.¹⁰ The next year (1885) she was appointed agent for the International Tract and Missionary Society in Colorado.¹¹ The next year they returned to Lincoln, Nebraska, where Nellie was appointed secretary of the Tract Society for Nebraska and, in 1888, treasurer of the Nebraska Conference. When the General Conference called the Druillards to become missionaries in South Africa, she felt a certain sadness at leaving the Tract Society position. Apparently, Nebraska Adventists had similar feelings about the Druillards leaving, because Eugene Farnsworth reported that “Bro. and sister [sic] Druillard hold a large place in the affections of our brethren and sisters in Nebraska.”¹²

Missionaries to Africa

In 1889 the General Conference sent Nellie and Alma Druillard to South Africa to help train Bible workers.¹³ They left for London on May 29,¹⁴ joining S. N. Haskell, who traveled with them from Dartmouth to South Africa on the *Norham Castle*.¹⁵ They stopped along the way in Lisbon, Portugal, and the Canary Islands, before heading south along the West African coast. They arrived in Cape Town on August 9, 1890.¹⁶ Peter Wessels expressed appreciation that their petition for help to the General Conference resulted in the coming of “so able laborers as Brother and Sister Druillard.” Alma had “charge of the ship mission,” while Nellie was responsible for “the book depository.”¹⁷ Thus, ministers, relieved of these duties, were available to do more missionary work.

“The work at Cape Town moves steadily along,” wrote one observer in 1890, “under the care of Brother and Sister Druillard.”¹⁸ Fellow missionary C. L. Boyd stated that “our working force has been greatly strengthened” by their coming.¹⁹ In her spare time, Nellie assisted with the small sanitarium operated by the Wessels family.

Alma worked as a “ship missionary,” selling Adventist literature on the numerous vessels from all around the world that passed through Table Bay. Often, they would leave literature to be sent to different ports of call.²⁰ Reports indicate that the colporteurs they trained were quite successful. Nellie described how she built on the colporteurs' work:

We are following up on the interest that the books awakened, with letters and by mailing copies of *Present Truth*, *Signs*, and *Bible Echo*. It takes much time to select the best papers and to write. We endeavor to read every one of our English papers, for we are anxious to get all the information that we can, and often we find that we can answer a letter with a paper, by knowing just what paper contains an article that we can mark and send. We have received letters from two persons who were converted from reading the books, and who are now keeping the Sabbath.²¹

Nellie possessed significant organizational and administrative skills. While in South Africa she was the president of the South African chapter of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union.²² She was also elected secretary/treasurer of the South African Mission in 1890.²³

On May 7, 1894, Alma joined a group of intrepid missionaries that included A. T. Robinson, Peter J. D. Wessels, Fred Sparrow, Adolph Goepp [Guoff], and “a boy to care for the mules” from Cape Town. They took a span (twelve) of mules with two horses pulling a wagon that rode by train to Vryburg. From there they spent a week getting supplies before heading into the interior to Fort Salisbury to meet with the Honorable C. J. Rhodes to request land for a mission in Bulawayo. They arrived in Bulawayo on July 4, and their request was subsequently honored.²⁴ After “looking over the country and consulting with government officials, [they] selected and registered what is known as the Seventh-day Adventist Mission Farm, a tract of 12,000 acres, about thirty-five miles west of Bulawayo.” This was the genesis of the Solusi Mission.²⁵ The Druillards purchased some additional land, which they donated to the mission, that expanded the property to 18,000 acres.²⁶

The Druillards remained active in South Africa. In late 1895, it was reported that Alma had organized manual labor after teaching a class showing them how to use tools; Nellie took “general management of the school.”²⁷

In December 1895, the Druillards left Africa for the United States. Arriving in Battle Creek, Michigan, on Jan. 14, 1896,²⁸ they spent several months recuperating before returning to South Africa.²⁹ They departed from New York City on the *Paris* on August 5, passing through Southampton, England, on August 13. They spent a week visiting friends, during which time Nellie spoke to the believers there about “mission work.”³⁰ They sailed again on August 22, arriving in Cape Town on September 8th.³¹ They returned in time for the dedication of the Cape Town Sanitarium, where Alma was the steward and Nellie matron of the new institution.³²

Return to the United States

Unfortunately, Alma's deteriorating health condition necessitated their permanent return to the United States.³³

In 1897 Alma was elected treasurer and Nellie matron of the newly formed Boulder Sanitarium.³⁴ They worked closely with Dr. W. H. Riley (superintendent) and the other medical staff, including O. G. Place, Kate Lindsay, and Alice Conway.³⁵

When Battle Creek College relocated to Berrien Springs, Michigan, the Druillards went to assist with this transition. Nellie wrote an article about the need for moving schools into the country to avoid the corrupting influences of city life.³⁶ She once again served as treasurer until 1903. It was here that Alma tragically died on December 29, 1903, in Berrien Springs, Michigan.³⁷

After her husband's death, at the encouragement of Ellen White, in 1904 Nellie moved to Madison, Tennessee, to assist her nephew, Edward A. Sutherland, and Percy T. Magan (whose education she had helped finance) start a new self-supporting school.³⁸ She loaned money to help purchase the property and for over twenty years served as treasurer of the institution. Nellie organized the Madison Sanitarium and its school of practical nursing, serving as its first instructor. In early 1908, she was part of the organization of the Southern Missionary Society and was a member of the original board of trustees.³⁹

While Nellie was attending the 1922 General Conference session, an automobile knocked her over and seriously injured her.⁴⁰ She sustained two broken legs, a broken nose, and other injuries, and “stayed in an invalid’s bed for two years.” She stated that this prevented her from “working myself to death.”⁴¹ While recuperating, she determined to do something for the poverty-stricken Blacks in the American South. She single-handedly organized the Riverside Sanitarium and School of Nursing to help disenfranchised Blacks. She invested ten years of her life in its development before transferring the deed to the General Conference.

Her last two years were spent on the campus of Madison College, where she attended board meetings and counseled self-supporting institutions that grew up around Madison. Nellie died on July 1, 1937, at the age of 91 and is buried in Rose Hill Cemetery in Berrien Springs, Michigan.⁴² A small collection of her papers is available at the Center for Adventist Research.⁴³

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NOTES

1. Alternate spellings of surname: Drouillard/Drowlard.

2. This date is based upon conflicting extant records. Traditional dating has her born December 1, 1844, but she had two older sisters, Mary (b. 1842) aged 7 and Angeline (b. 1844) aged 6 in the 1850 Federal Census. Nellie H. is listed as 4 years old in the same census. Since the date of

her birth is consistently listed as Dec. 1st, it seems most probable that she was born in either 1845 or 1846. Since the date Dec. 1st appears reliable from extant sources, it seems most likely that she was born Dec. 1, 1845, approximating her age in early 1850 when the census was taken. In antebellum America, before reliable vital statistics were standardized, it was not uncommon for people to approximate their age or to be somewhat off by a year or two.

3. "Alexander Rankin obituary," *ARH*, October 19, 1897, 671; "Lydia A. Rankin obituary," *ARH*, January 24, 1899, 62.
4. E. W. Farnsworth, "Camp-Meetings in Nebraska and Missouri," *ARH*, Aug. 26, 1890, 524.
5. E. A. Sutherland, "Nellie H. Druillard obituary," *ARH*, August 19, 1937, 22.
6. E. W. Farnsworth, "Camp-Meetings in Nebraska and Missouri," *ARH*, August 26, 1890, 524.
7. Mary E. Phinney, "Rebecca Drouillard obituary," *ARH*, March 13, 1879, 87.
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9. Alma Drouillard, "Eliza Drouillard obituary," *ARH*, June 5, 1883, 366.
10. "Colorado Conference Proceedings," *ARH*, October 7, 1884, 637.
11. "Agents and Branch Offices," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Battle Creek, MI: Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association, 1885), 9.
12. E. W. Farnsworth, "The Camp-Meeting in Nebraska," *ARH*, November 5, 1889, 700.
13. General Conference Committee, March 26, 1889, 52, General Conference Archives, accessed January 31, 2022, <https://documents.adventistarchives.org/Minutes/GCC/GCC1889.pdf>.
14. "Movements of Workers," *ARH*, May 28, 1882, 352.
15. An alternate account of Haskell's report with the name of the ship appears as: S. N. H[askell], "Three-Weeks' Voyage," *The Signs of the Times*, September 30, 1889, 600. For details of the ship, see: <http://www.bandcstaffregister.com/page1970.html> [accessed January 2, 2022].
16. S. N. H[askell], "From London to Africa," *Bible Echo and Signs of the Times*, October 1, 1889, 298.
17. P. W. B. Wessels, "The South African Mission Field, (concluded)," *The Signs of the Times*, November 18, 1889, 699.
18. "Our South African Mission," *The Home Missionary*, September 1890, 199.
19. C. L. Boyd, "South Africa," *Bible Echo and Signs of the Times*, August 15, 1890, 125.

20. A. Druillard, [Letter dated Oct. 1, 1890], *The Home Missionary*, November 1890, 257.
21. Nellie H. Druillard quoted by W. C. W[hite], "Our Missionaries," *The Home Missionary*, January 1891, 9.
22. E. M. Morrison, "A Letter from South Africa," *Bible Echo and Signs of the Times*, March 1, 1891, 77.
23. W. C. W[hite], "Our Missionaries," *The Home Missionary*, January 1891, 9.
24. A. T. Robinson, "Off for Mashonaland," *The Home Missionary*, July 1894, 158.
25. W. H. Anderson, "Sketch of the Matabele Mission," *The Bible Echo*, February 12, 1900, 109.
26. See note in *The Youth's Instructor*, February 15, 1900, 54.
27. A. T. Robinson, "Claremont, South Africa, Union College," *ARH*, January 21, 1896, 41.
28. See note, *ARH*, January 21, 1896, 48.
29. See note in *Good Health*, February 1896, 65. Dr. J. H. Kellogg recalls meeting them several years earlier while they were transiting through England.
30. A[Ima] Druillard, "South Africa," *ARH*, October 20, 1896, 672.
31. Ibid.
32. See note in *Good Health*, Sept. 1896, 290.
33. See note *Good Health*, April 1897, 250.
34. "The Colorado Medical Missionary and Benevolent Association," *The Bible Echo*, October 4, 1897, 317.
35. G. W. Reaser, "Colorado Sanitarium," *ARH*, November 12, 1901, 739.
36. Mrs. N. L. Druillard, "How to Start an Exodus from the Cities," *The Advocate of Christian Education*, August 1903, 227-228.
37. "Alma Druillard," Find a Grave, 2022, accessed January 2, 2022, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/42263612/alma-druillard>.
38. See note documenting Nellie's resignation from working at Emmanuel Missionary College to join the new venture for a school near Nashville, Tennessee. *The Advocate of Christian Education*, August 1904, 127.
39. "Annual Meeting of the Southern Missionary Society," *The Gospel Herald*, March 1908, 9-10.

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