Sather, Myrtle Irene (1905–1971)

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Myrtle Irene Sather was an Adventist missionary, nurse, and administrator in Africa and North America.

Early Life (1905-1923)

Myrtle Irene Sather was born at Greenbush, Roseau County, Minnesota, on February 4, 1905, to Henry Olaf and Mathilda Annette (Petersen) Sather, both of whom were children of Norwegian immigrants. Myrtle Sather joined three older brothers in a family eventually totaling nine children. Living in Greenbush near her father's family for only a brief time, Sather's family soon moved to a farm near her mother's family in Gilchrist, Minnesota. Around 111, her parents became Seventh-day Adventists and Sather enjoyed participating in the Gilchrist Seventh-day Adventist Church. She also learned about life's difficulties, losing her oldest brother, Orel, when she was five years old. When she was nearly 18, she lost her other two older brothers, Ernest and Lloyd in a tragic drowning accident, leaving her the oldest surviving child. No doubt her early life helped prepare her for the challenges of her chosen career as a missionary nurse.

Early Years of Service and Training (1924-1943)

From 1920 to 1924, Sather attended Hutchinson Theological Seminary at Hutchinson, Minnesota, an institution which trained church workers, many of them recent immigrants, in their native Danish and Norwegian languages. After graduation in 1924, she was employed by the South Wisconsin Conference as an office worker until October 1927 when she returned to Minnesota. In the fall of 1930, Sather continued her education in Hutchinson, where Hutchinson Theological Seminary and Maplewood Academy had merged in 1928 on the seminary campus. While the school was now mainly a secondary school, it continued to offer some college-level classes until 1932. Sather enrolled in college and academy classes and performed secretarial duties. She also kept busy participating in musical events, leading out in prayer bands, and serving as a member of the committee for the yearbook, "The Hutchsonian." Sadly, yet another loss occurred for Sather when, in the spring of 1932, her 58-year-old father passed away. By that fall, Sather was a member of the Maplewood Academy faculty, teaching shorthand and accounting, a role she filled through the spring of 1938.

In the fall of 1938, Sather enrolled at Pacific Union College in California, graduating in July 1939 with a pre-nursing degree. Thereafter, she entered St. Helena Sanitarium School of Nursing which emphasized training nurses to be health educators and to share their faith—skills particularly useful to missionary nurses. Sather graduated from St. Helena with a Registered Nurse degree in 1942. Coincidentally, there were two Myrtle Irenes who graduated in that 1942 nursing class, the other being Myrtle Irene Reimer, and the two women's paths would soon cross again. For a short time, Sather worked as an office nurse at St. Helena Sanitarium. However, before long she returned to Minnesota to care for her failing mother until her mother died in September 1943. With the death of her parents and three oldest brothers, and younger siblings grown up, Sather focused her caretaking skills in new directions.

Kanye Medical Mission (1944-1955)

In November 1944, Sather accepted a call from the General Conference to become a mission nurse for the Southern African Division. It was a role she would occupy for nearly two decades. However, as with many other missionaries, her departure was deferred until the close of World War II. She sailed for Africa in October 1945, headed to Bechuanaland (now Botswana) where she would serve at Kanye Medical Mission. It was at Kanye that Sather joined her fellow 1942 St. Helena classmate, Myrtle Irene Reimer, who had already begun work there. Sather was a welcome addition to the overtaxed mission staff consisting of Reimer and Dr. C. Paul Bringle. Together, the two women (Sather now age 40 and Reimer, 27) took on the challenges of providing nursing care and patient health education, developing a nursing program, and establishing dispensary outposts—challenges they accomplished with admirable success.

Although Christianity had been introduced to the people of Bechuanaland more than a century before through the heroic work of David Livingstone and other pioneering missionaries, Christians comprised only a small minority of the population, and among them ardor for the faith had largely diminished. The pagan majority had become settled in their resistance to Christianity. However, the Adventist medical missionary work, after entering the land in 1921, had achieved a breakthrough for the gospel.

The needs at Kanye and the surrounding area ranged from mass vaccination of hundreds of patients in a single day to the care of patients with serious illnesses, such as leprosy and tuberculosis. Work was typically carried out in the midst of difficult conditions. The climate and terrain were inhospitable, the populace hostile in some areas, and they lacked adequate staff, sanitary facilities, water, and medical supplies (or any supplies for that matter). Poorly constructed buildings with mud-cow-dung floors and holes in the roofs presented an additional difficulty. The mission hospital's dispensary outstations required travel up treacherous mountain roads or across hundreds of miles of desert in vehicles prone to mechanical failures that left them waiting days in the desert for repairs. In these outposts, Sather made many visits, treating large numbers of patients. In one instance, she and two other workers treated 1,300 patients in a ten-day period.

At Kanye, Sather and Reimer played an integral part in developing a nursing program. By the fall of 1946, they had prepared four students for the first capping ceremony. The program prepared graduates for a variety of roles including hospital staff nurses, charge nurses at dispensaries hundreds of miles from the nearest physician, and mid-
wives (after the required additional training). Sather noted the importance of incorporating the spiritual aspect into the training: "A consecrated nurse who loves her people can reach many who might otherwise turn a deaf ear to the gospel message. As she ministers to them in time of suffering and need she breaks down prejudice and builds up confidence and this 'wedge' opens the way for seeds of truth to be sown."4 Moreover, in addition to providing care and health education, the nurses shared literature and encouraged patients to participate in hospital Bible studies and Sabbath School programs. Many lives were touched and many were converted from all classes of society, including a chief's family. Also, a number of students who were not Adventist when they entered the nursing program joined the Church by the time training was completed.

Sather and Reimer worked side-by-side in this work until 1949 when Reimer returned home due to health concerns. Then, in early 1951, another heartache from home was added to the challenges Sather faced when one of her remaining brothers, Rueben, age 36, was killed by an exploding tire just one month after the birth of his youngest child.

After a one-month extension to her furlough that spring, Sather returned to Africa to develop mission services and recruit resources. By 1954, Kanye had a well-equipped operating room along with many pieces of new and valuable medical equipment, much of it courtesy of the Loma Linda College of Medical Evangelists alumni. New x-ray equipment had been provided by the government and a hydrotherapy department was being completed. A report published in 1955 summarized Kanye's achievements as the oldest Adventist hospital in the Southern African Division. With three outlying dispensaries, it had expanded its service area over a radius of nearly 300 miles. In the previous year it had served more than 17,000 patients, 4,000 of them in the Kalahari Desert. The hospital also took root in new places. In one area, after an Adventist dispensary was established, a small church had grown to 150 members and was still growing.

Even on furloughs, Sather was never idle. She captured the interest of audiences at home with her missionary presentations, recruited mission nurses, and worked on a Bachelor of Science in Nursing Education at Washington Missionary College, which she completed in 1951.

**Southern African Division Medical Secretary (1956-1962)**

In an era when it was unusual for woman to hold high administrative posts in the denomination, Sather was appointed medical secretary of the Southern African Division in 1956, the first nurse to hold this position at a division level. Embracing her new role, Sather reviewed facilities within the ten countries in the division, making treks across challenging terrain in difficult conveyances to visit distant hospitals, medical schools, dispensaries and maternity centers—most run by locally-trained African workers. In reporting the poor conditions of many sites, she wondered how long one structure with a thatched roof and mud plastered walls could remain standing and, at another site, described cardboard boxes being used to cradle two tiny premature babies. She oversaw a mission field where workers often labored around-the-clock to minister in overcrowded facilities with meager supplies. Through her visits and mission reports, Sather enthusiastically encouraged workers and endeavored to find additional resources, sending hand-written letters to workers to inform them about the status of their requests. As she supported an expanding service area, she found the people to be "very friendly, and anxious for our medical work to open."

Sather represented the Southern African Division as a delegate to the 1950, 1958, and 1962 General Conferences, serving each time on the Plans Committee. In 1959, Robert H. Pierson, President of the Southern African Division, expressed his support for her endeavors, pointing out the importance of the medical work in the areas of Africa stricken by poverty and disease. He highlighted the need to train local workers and equip them for leadership. Pierson urged that "as rapidly as men and means are available we should work with Miss Sather and our fine corps of medical workers in training African young men and women for more and more responsible positions in our hospitals." During the 1962 rioting in Ruanda-Urundi (soon to become the nations of Rwanda and Burundi), in which a number of Adventists lost their lives, Adventist institutions became refugee camps under Sather's supervision. By the 1962 General Conference, Sather was able to report, "We now have ten hospitals, attached to which are five leprosariums. The capacity of these institutions—1,000 beds—is usually far overtaxed. We also operate 34 clinics and dispensaries. This work is cared for by 53 doctors and nurses, assisted by nearly 300 helpers." The work had substantially grown since Sather and Reimer had joined the mission nearly two decades earlier.

In the spring of 1962, Sather received word that her sister, Blanche Lonnstrom, was seriously ill. In order to care for her, Sather requested to take furlough early and returned home to Minnesota in April. The sisters had several precious months together before Blanche passed to her rest on August 25, 1962. Shortly thereafter, Sather determined that her career as a mission nurse needed to conclude. The division committee reluctantly granted her request for permanent leave, giving recognition of her service: "Her contribution has been not only in personal ministry to the suffering but in the larger sphere of building up training facilities, and the inspiration of her unselfish and consistently Christian example."

**Kettering Hospital (1963-1969)**

However, by February 1963 the Church was calling upon Sather again, this time to serve as Assistant Director of Nursing Service at the new Kettering Memorial Hospital in Dayton, Ohio. What made the call even more appealing was that her sister, Gladys Larson, was also being called to Kettering to work in food service. It had been many years since Sather had enjoyed the privilege of living close to family. The sisters now joined in the initial setup and
development of the new institution’s services, making it ready to provide quality care when it opened for patients on March 3, 1964.46

Sather brought the same zest and passion to her new role as she had displayed when she was a mission nurse—working in earnest to recruit compassionate and competent Christian nurses from across the nation and lay a lasting foundation for high quality nursing at the new institution. She lent a personal touch to all encounters, often inviting new employees to her home and mentoring them in her motherly way while ensuring that all pre-employment promises were kept.

Not only did Sather take up the work within the hospital's walls, she also represented the hospital in a wider arena, speaking at camp meetings and other venues.47 Always mission minded, though, Sather never forgot the needs of her people in Botswana. She worked with Kettering staff and the Adventist Dorcas Society (now Adventist Community Services) to gather clothing and medical supplies, which included a recent model isolette for premature infants to be shipped from Kettering to Kanye Hospital in Africa.48


Sather continued in her role at Kettering until December 1969 when health concerns reduced her ability to work. She maintained a personal interest in employees and events at Kettering as she was able. On July 4, 1971, while visiting her niece in Berrien Springs, she suffered a heart attack, but having survived previous attacks, she minimized concern over it. Back in Kettering, while traveling to a doctor's appointment on August 10, 1971, Sather suffered another heart attack that proved to be fatal. She died the same day at Kettering Medical Center.49 Thus ended a lifetime of dedicated service to the Church and people she loved so dearly.50 She was laid to rest in the Miami Valley Memory Gardens in Centerville, Ohio.51

**Contribution**

During her service in Africa, Sather “guided in the development of 11 hospitals, 48 clinics, and 6 schools for nurses, midwives, and medical assistants.”52 She pioneered as the first non-physician to serve as medical secretary for a division of the world church, and did so in an era when women rarely held such roles. At Kettering she impacted the lives of many who worked together to build a lasting health care organization that has earned a reputation for excellence. Even though Sather never married, she left behind a host of “family” in relatives, co-workers, students, and friends throughout the world whose lives were touched with her enthusiasm, compassion, and standards of excellence.

**SOURCES**


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**NOTES**


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