

Sparrow, David (1867–?)

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The coming of Adventism to the western region of Kenya is directly attributed to a South African settler farmer of British descent named David Sparrow, who arrived with his wife Sallie and son Bert in British East Africa in December 1911. Unlike other regions that were entered through missionary effort, David Sparrow and his wife Sallie were only settler farmers. They settled at the Uasin Gishu Plateau where they shared their faith with the Nandi people, bringing to the faith a good number and planting several churches before their return to South Africa in 1941.

Early life

David Sparrow was born in South Africa on July 1, 1867, to British migrants Emma and Frederick Sparrow who settled at Barthust near Grahamstown in the Eastern Cape of South Africa.¹ David was their fourth child in what would eventually be a family of 12 children—Christopher, Harriet, Charles, David, Frederick Jr., Elizabeth, Ruth, Arthur, Emma, Eileen, Bertha, and George. Their father, Fred Sparrow, was also a Methodist minister who ran the local church. David attended nearby schools and after completing his education he began apprenticing at a mechanic's shop where he learned to construct and repair ox-wagons which was the most popular form of transport of the day. His father, Frederick Sparrow, died in February 1887 at the age of 47 when David was just 19.

Sparrow Becomes an Adventist

Only months after his father's death, the first Adventist missionaries from America arrived in Cape Town. These were D. A. Robinson, Charles L. Boyd, together with their wives, a Bible instructor Ms. Carrie Mace, and two colporteurs George Burleigh and R. S. Anthony. They arrived at Cape Town on July 28, 1887. By the time of their arrival David, now 20, lived more than 600 miles from Cape Town.

In August 1889, the great Adventist evangelist and missionary, Elder Stephen N. Haskell, came to South Africa and worked there for five months to bolster the work of the young church. He spent some time in the Eastern Cape preaching at various places, including Rokeby Park where young David congregated at the local Methodist church. Haskell left South Africa for India on January 12, 1890, sailing from Durban.² In his place, Elder Ira J.

Hankins had been sent to South Africa.

On January 3, 1890, only days prior to Haskell's departure, Hankins moved to Rokeby Park in Grahamstown and began to do house-to-house preaching. Rokeby Park was a large area sparsely populated with a handful of homes, one of which belonged to the Sparrows. It was from the work of Pastor Hankins in this area that David Sparrow and his family members heard of the Adventist message for the first time. David decided to join the Adventist church together with three of his brothers and his eldest sister. There were 30 people in total who joined the church following the first series of evangelistic campaigns held by Ira J. Hankins and David Fletcher Tarr (first English-speaking South African to become an Adventist). After his baptism, David Sparrow became a foundational member of the Rokeby Park Seventh-day Adventist Church, which was Africa's third Adventist church. Africa's first ever Adventist church was organized by Pieter Wessels at Beaconsfield in Kimberly on the property of G. J. "Henry" Van Druten. The work then went to Cape Town where the second church was organized at Roeland Street.

Early Work as a Missionary

David's oldest brother, Christopher Sparrow (born in 1862), and Charles Sparrow (born in 1865), pursued various lines of work, but by 1890 both of them had joined the Adventist church and were soon in active ministry. Their sister Harriet (born in 1863) also joined the church. She would marry James Pittaway, also a pioneer Adventist of the Eastern Cape.

From the year 1892 through 1899, more members of the Sparrow family became Adventists and eventually their mother Emma joined the church. During this period, David divided his work time between the wagon business and evangelism in the Eastern Cape. In 1893 he married Sarah-Ann (Sallie) Pittaway, the daughter of Frederick and Charlotte Pittaway who also became Adventists from the work of Hankins. David and Sallie chose to conduct fulltime ministry, and they became credentialed missionaries of the Cape Colony Conference which had been organized in 1892.³ The need for workers among the Africans was great and David Sparrow was immediately sent to work among the Xhosa in the Eastern Cape area which was under the Cape Colony Conference. It was here that he learned to be fluent in the Xhosa language, and between 1902 and 1905 he primarily conducted missionary activity there.⁴

Further Work as a Missionary

In 1906, David and Sallie Sparrow moved to Bulawayo in Rhodesia where they joined David's older brother Christopher who had been serving at the Adventist Mission at Solusi. Sallie worked as a nurse at the Solusi Mission and was of much help at the height of a fever epidemic that struck that year.⁵ The land on which the Solusi Mission at Bulawayo stood was secured by their younger brother Frederick Sparrow and was especially close to their heart. For a year, David worked among the Ndebele people, again gaining fluency in their

language. While at Bulawayo, a daughter named Alvinah (Maude) was born to them.

In 1907 David and Sallie moved to the Natal-Transvaal Conference where he worked among the Zulu, utilizing his fluency in that language to reach many people there. He became a member of the Natal Conference Executive Committee under its president, Pastor Herbert J. Edmed. The Sparrows also became licensed colporteurs and were responsible for selling a significant number of books during their time in Natal.

In 1908 David returned to the Cape Colony Conference and worked in their offices at 56 Roeland Street in Cape Town. While living there, a son was born to them whom they named Herbert Vivian Sparrow. For the next two years David worked among the Africans, first in the Cape Town vicinity and then in Bloemfontein in the Orange River Colony (now Orange Free State).

In 1910 David Sparrow was appointed to manage Kimberly Baths, a premier sanatorium and health facility founded by the Cape Colony Conference. It was situated at Cheapside in Kimberley in the Northern Cape. Here they catered to the wealthy clientele and the facility served the nearby diamond mines. Sallie worked there as the matron and was in charge of the female clientele. After serving at Kimberly Baths, David and Sallie Sparrow moved to the Maranatha Mission in Martindale near Grahamstown. He was appointed to serve as the superintendent of the mission, working primarily among the Xhosa people.⁶

Moving to East Africa

It was probably while working at the Kimberley Baths that David Sparrow met and became friends with Dr. Harry Bridgeman, a prominent Cape Town dentist who had purchased land in British East Africa. Bridgeman had purchased a considerable piece of land on the Uasin Gishu Plateau in the west of Kenya. He asked David Sparrow if he could manage it for him. After considering the matter, David agreed to move to BEA and work for Bridgeman. They packed their belongings and whatever they would need on the farm into several trunks. He dismantled the wagon he had used so often in his mission work at Grahamstown and packed it in their luggage for East Africa. They made arrangements for their young daughter Maude to remain with the family of R. C. Honey, another missionary based at Content in the Eastern Cape and who was a member of the Cape Colony Conference Executive Committee. Little Herbert, three years old, would go with them to East Africa.

On December 5, 1911, their boat left the Cape Town Harbor heading north towards Mombasa, arriving on December 24, 1911. They took the train to Nairobi, arriving the following day and stopping just long enough to write back to their friends in South Africa to tell them about their safe arrival.⁷ Again taking the train up to the highlands, they finally arrived at the Londiani station on January 12, 1912. Londiani was the end of the journey by train for those who wanted to go into the Uasin Gishu Plateau and the western highlands of Kenya's Rift Valley. Hundreds of Afrikaner farmers from South Africa had already settled the area and a new town had just been established. The town lay 64 miles from Londiani, so it was named "Sixty-four" before it was eventually named Eldoret. The journey there had to be made on foot.

Disembarking at Londiani, Sparrow reassembled the ox-wagon and loaded up their goods. He then attached it to a team of 16 oxen that Bridgeman had purchased from Hugh Cholmondeley the 3^d Baron Delamere. Famously known as Lord Delamere, he was one of the largest settler farmers of Kenya at that time. Delamere sent a driver to accompany the oxen and fitted them with gear ready to haul the Sparrow wagon into the Plateau.⁸

The trek through miles of dense forest and roadless savannah was not easy for the Sparrow family, particularly with the toddler Herbert traveling with them. Such journeys often took up to two weeks, with stops every five or ten miles, depending on the conditions. On arrival at the Bridgeman farm, in what is today the Burnt Forest area, they found the land unbroken and still in its pristine state. David Sparrow immediately fell in love with the country and its people. He lived next to the Nandi people whom he set out to make contact with. The Europeans on the plateau were mainly Afrikaner farmers or *Boers* who had come from South Africa. The missionary in him immediately devised a method of reaching them with the gospel truth. He wrote to the church paper, the *South African Missionary*, requesting Adventist literature in the Afrikaans language which would be distributed to the Boers on the Uasin Gishu Plateau.⁹ He also requested English language literature for distribution to his English-speaking European neighbors. The Sparrows used their ox-wagon to distribute the donated Adventist literature to surrounding farms.

Life on the Uasin Gishu Plateau

Life on the plateau was, plainly put, difficult. At worst it was dangerous, with the wildlife and the local people not making it easy for the settlers. Without even a house to sleep in, the trio spent their first few weeks sleeping in their ox-wagon until they had constructed a mud and daub rondavel with grass-thatch roofing. He cut the brush and, using the same oxen that had hauled them up, he worked hard to break the land and make a farm. The land was teeming with wildlife and David Sparrow acquired a game license to protect the wildlife.¹⁰

In mid-1913, Sallie and David Sparrow moved to their own land next to the Nandi Reserve. The exact location of the farm is in an area that is known today as Kipkenyo, about six miles south-west of Eldoret town.¹¹ Although David Sparrow now had his own land, he still managed Harry Bridgeman's land at Burnt Forest. He was, however, much closer to the new town, Eldoret.¹² David Sparrow gave his land the name *Ndege Farm* from the Swahili word for "bird" after his own name. The Nandi who were Sparrow's immediate neighbors south of the land gave him the name *Chepkulios*, after the bird *Kuliosiot*, which is "sparrow" in their language. Sparrow endeavored to understand his neighbors, their language, culture, and laws, with the aim of reaching out to them with the gospel message.¹³

Right from their first encounter with the Nandi, Chepkulios, as he was now known, did whatever he could to evangelize the people and to share the Adventist message.¹⁴ After fighting the British in a brutal war that ended in 1905, the Nandi distrusted Europeans and never wanted to be a part of their religion. They were moved to

reserves and the bulk of their land went to European settlers, one of whom was Sparrow himself. Sparrow earnestly embarked on learning the Nandi language but, being Nilo-Hamitic, he found it somewhat difficult to master.

Although he had mastered the Xhosa, Ndebele, and Zulu languages, Nandi proved to be something of a challenge. To overcome this, he requested an African missionary from South Africa to work among the Nandi people, promising to support him financially and to provide accommodation.¹⁵ Nobody responded to the request, but he was not discouraged. He learned to speak Kiswahili (a Bantu language), although it did not help much since the Nandi did not speak that language. Given the vast distance between and the lack of communication with other Adventists, particularly the missionaries in Kenya, the Sparrows maintained their faith within their immediate family.

David Sparrow Shares His Faith with the Nandi

Upon arrival at Ndege Farm in 1913, several Nandi's came to work on the Sparrow farm, providing much needed labor. It was a general rule on the farm that at sundown Friday until sundown Saturday no work was done. This was the designated day, the Sparrows explained, that was the Sabbath of the Lord. Soon word about this went round and their farm became known as "Kapchepkulios, where nothing is done on Saturday."¹⁶ It was not until the year 1916 that the Sparrows were able to make a significant breakthrough among the Nandi. It was at this time that Caleb Kipkessio araap Busienei, a young Nandi whom David had preached to, made the decision to become an Adventist. Together they established a church in their barn at Ndege Farm and in the next few years more Nandis became Adventists. David Sparrow also established in the barn a school where they could learn to read and write.

In 1928, a Nandi named Ezekiel Kimenjo araap Maswai who had become an Adventist at the Gendia Mission, was sent to Sparrow so he could assist in the work among the Nandi. The year 1928 generally marks the moving of Adventists from the Sparrow farm into the Nandi Reserve. Already there were about a dozen Nandi Adventists from Sparrow's work since he settled among the Nandi. However, none of them were able to work independently as evangelists to take the message to the larger Nandi area. After a few months at the Sparrow farm, Maswai was ready to take the gospel message to the Nandi Reserve. Together with Caleb Kipkessio, they traveled to Gendia where they trained as literature evangelists.

In May 1929, David Sparrow was nominated to sit on the inaugural Eldoret Municipal Board by Kenya's acting governor, Sir Jacob W. Barth. This position made him a man of influence on the plateau. By this time the Sparrows had started a church among the Europeans in Eldoret and Kitale (see Growth of the Adventist Church among European Settlers in Kenya).

In 1931, following intense work by Maswai and with the help of Sparrow, the first church in the Nandi reserve was established at Kaigat. However, the Sparrows faced insurmountable challenges on the plateau. Frequent drought, crop disease, animal disease, plagues of locusts, low crop and livestock prices, the Great Depression, and other disasters made farming at this time a most difficult venture. To diversify their income, the Sparrows also operated some businesses in town. Other than running Ndege Farm and the World View Estate, David Sparrow also ran a commodities shop known as D. Sparrow & Son, stocking various farming implements. It is clear that Sparrow wanted to diversify his income, saving him from the vagaries of the Depression. At one point he owned a bakery and a garage, both of which appear to have declined over time.

Leadership on the Plateau – Declining Health

Between 1934 and 1935, David Sparrow underwent two serious operations and, although his health was restored, he didn't regain his strength. The operations forced him to slow down his work, particularly the itinerant evangelism and work on his two vast farms. On June 1, 1936, David Sparrow decided to join elective council politics and was elected to the Municipal Board of Eldoret¹⁷ for a term of five years. His election to the municipality shows that he had become a respectable member of society and had earned the confidence of the European settlers who were the only ones who could vote at that time.

In March 1938, David Sparrow appeared in a Kenya Gazette notice endorsing Arthur Cecil Hoey for the Uasin Gishu Electoral Area (No. 8) for the Legislative Council.¹⁸ It would happen that in 1973, Hoey's former land was purchased by the Adventists and they built on his old home place the Segero Adventist School (Main) which remains a premier Adventist institution in the region and one of the largest in the world.

Return to South Africa

In 1941 David Sparrow resigned his municipal seat and returned to South Africa with his wife Sallie, ending three decades of living in Kenya. Only months after their return, Sallie died in January 1942 and was laid to rest at Simonstown near Cape Town. She was 70. In August 1947 he attended an event organized by the Durban Church Dorcas Society to honor Adventist pioneers aged 70 and above. There were 17 pioneers who attended the fete.¹⁹ David had just turned 80 and was one of nine who were 80 or above.

Two years later, in April 1949, David Sparrow buried his oldest sister Harriet Sparrow Pittaway who died at her Langholm Estate home near Grahamstown.²⁰ The death of Harriet left seven other Sparrows of the original 12. Her husband James was David's brother-in-law in three ways (James Pittaway, who had been married to Harriet, was the older brother of David's wife Sallie. James' younger brother Frederick Pittaway married Ruth Sparrow, David's seventh born sister).

It appears there are no available records to confirm the exact date of David Sparrow's death.²¹ His son Herbert remained in Kenya until Independence, leaving in 1963. From 1962 to 1963, Herbert served as the last European mayor of their beloved town Eldoret. He left Kenya for England, not to South Africa the place of his birth. A street in Eldoret, Sparrow Street, was named in honor of David Sparrow, but at Independence it was renamed Oloo Street, after the man who took over from Herbert Sparrow as the first African mayor of Eldoret. The old ox-wagon that brought them to the Plateau in 1911 was donated to the Norfolk Hotel in Nairobi and it is well preserved.

SOURCES

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NOTES

1. From a write-up by Mr. E. M. Sparrow compiled about 1988 and graciously shared with us by Yvette Sparrow.
2. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*, 1891, Review and Herald Publishing Association, Battle Creek, MI, 85.
3. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*, 1904, Review and Herald Publishing Association, Washington, D.C., 71.
4. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*, 1907, Review and Herald Publishing Association, Washington D.C., 93.

5. R. C. Porter writing in *The South African Missionary*, vol. 12, no. 13, Kenilworth, Cape, 2.
6. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*, 1910, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Washington, D.C., 120.
7. *The South African Missionary*, March 4, 1912, vol. XI, no. 9, 4.
8. Jan Hemsing, *Norfolk Hotel - The First One Hundred Years* (Oakland Media Services, 2004).
9. *The South African Missionary*, October 7, 1912, vol. XI no. 40, Kenilworth, Cape, 4.
10. Game Licenses issued in the East Africa Protectorate for the quarter ended March 31, 1920. *The Official Gazette*, August 25, 1920, the Government Printer, Nairobi, 801.
11. Notice No. 562, *The Official Gazette* Vol. XL – No. 23, April 26, 1938. Government Printer, Nairobi, 44.5
12. The place was renamed “Kipkenyo” by Nandi migrants led by Ahmed Malakwen araap Sisiwa who had lived in the original Kaptumo of southern Nandi. This is why we have the duplicate names Kipkenyo, Mugundoi, and Kaptumo in Uasin Gishu as well as in Nandi.
13. *The South African Missionary*, vol. 12, no. 20, June 9, 1913, 4.
14. *The South African Missionary*, vol. 12, no. 30, August 18, 1913, 2.
15. *The South African Missionary*, vol. 14, no. 33, August 16, 1915, 3.
16. Sang, Godfrey K., Kili, Hosea K., (2017) *On the Wings of a Sparrow: How the Seventh-day Adventist Church came to Western Kenya*, Gapman Publications Ltd., Nairobi, 274.
17. General Notice No. 646, *The Official Gazette*, June 9, 1936, The Government Printer, Nairobi, 556.
18. Government Notice No. 161 of March 7, 1938. *The Official Gazette*, Vol. XL – No. 13, The Government Printer, Nairobi, 227.
19. *Southern African Division Outlook*, vol. XLV, no. 16, September 1, 1947, 4.
20. *Southern African Division Outlook*, vol. XLVII, no. 8, May 1, 1949, 12.
21. The subject of this article is not to be confused with David Sparrow, a student at Helderberg, who died in 1972 (“David Sparrow, obituary citation, *Trans-Africa Division Outlook*, Seventh-day Adventist Obituary Index, accessed May 9, 2019, https://encore.andrews.edu/iii/encore/record/C__Rb3781591__SSparrow%2C%20David__Ff%3Afacetcollections%3A2%3A2%3ASDA%20Obituaries%3A%3A_O).

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