

Wallace, Ira Otto (1898–1964) and Mary (Stivers) (1896–1981)

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Mary and Ira O. Wallace at the Sianfu (now Xi'an, Shaanxi Province, China) mission compound in the summer of 1925.

Photo courtesy of Stephen Taylor Hall.

Ira Otto Wallace and his wife, Mary Stivers Wallace, were missionaries, colporteurs, nursing home administrators, and pioneers in establishing the nursing home healthcare industry.

Early Life and Family

Ira Otto Wallace was born July 14, 1898, and raised in Lockport, Kentucky, the youngest of four children born to Thomas Girley and Ellen Barr Wallace. Mary Elizabeth Stivers was born July 22, 1896, also in Lockport, the youngest of three children born to William and Martha Coots Stivers, neighbors of the Wallace family.

Ira Wallace and Mary Stivers were married March 2, 1916. As a young man, Ira Wallace had planned on becoming a Methodist minister. He changed his mind when an Adventist colporteur came to their farm outside of Lockport. The colporteur kept visiting and Wallace kept buying books until, as Mary Wallace later said, "he just read himself into the Adventist faith and I followed right along with him." The encounter with the colporteur was a life-changing event for Wallace. Not only did he accept the Adventist faith, he became a colporteur himself!

The family relocated to Owensboro, Kentucky, in 1918, and Wallace began selling books in the Kentucky-Tennessee Conference. Mary and Ira Wallace attended the Kentucky Colporteurs' Institute, a 12-day seminar for literature evangelists, in Louisville, Kentucky, in January of 1919.² They lost their baby girl, six-month-old Dorrise Marie, that same month to the 1918-1919 flu pandemic. They continued selling books while Ira Wallace attended Southern Missionary College from around 1920 to 1922. After college, he pastored the Bowling Green, Kentucky, church until they received the call for mission service in Sianfu (Xi'an), capital of Shensi (Shaanxi) Province in North-Central China.

Mission Service in China

Ira and Mary Wallace, with their children Juanita and Geneva (age 4 and 2 1/2 respectively), arrived in Shanghai on April 26, 1924.³ It was no ordinary time, for in 1924 China was on the cusp of an escalation of conflicts that would revolutionize the land and shake the world.

Upon reaching Sianfu, the Wallaces set about building a walled mission compound outside the ancient walled city—the oldest of four historical capitals of China. For a three-year period before their arrival, Shensi Province had no foreign workers. It was slow getting started again, but working with Pastor W. E. Gillis, the newly appointed director of the province, Ira Wallace guided the indigenous colporteurs in finding ways to reach their sales goals. Along with supervising the colporteurs, he acted as secretary and treasurer for the mission. When Gillis was away, he preached in his place.⁴

Throughout 1924 and 1925, peaceful conditions allowed the work to grow significantly. While the work grew, so did the family. Mary Wallace birthed a healthy boy, Harold Clyde, in February of 1925.⁵ By Christmas of that year, however, the long civil war for control of China came to their door in all its fury as the Nationalist (Kuomintang) army's Northern Expedition moved toward its culmination.⁶

The Adventist mission compound was taken over that spring and used as a fort to fire upon Sianfu. The Wallace and Gillis families, along with thirty-two other European missionaries and hundreds of thousands of refugees, were forced to take sanctuary inside the walled city. Once there, they were besieged for seven months by constant bombardment and were cut off from all communication with the outside world.⁷

To add to their difficulties, Mary Wallace was seven months pregnant when they fled into the city on May 20, 1926. Thanks to the Scandinavian Alliance Mission, they were able to occupy two of the foreign homes of the Y.M.C.A. On July 13, Mary Wallace gave birth to Ira Otto Wallace, Jr. amidst the shelling while hiding in an interior closet of the home. "The young English doctor was scared, I was scared, the firing was worse than ever," she later recalled. "It was a hard delivery."⁸

In his memoirs, Ira described conditions as of September 1926:

There now seemed no hope of peace. Conditions were almost unbearable. Hundreds were dying daily of starvation....[O]ur work was cut off. We could do no literature work on the outside or within Sianfu. Our entire Tract Society stock was looted and sold to small shop owners who then resold the tracts. Ironically, only in this way was the Lord able to continue the literature work.⁹

The family managed to escape Sianfu on October 11.¹⁰ While Mary Wallace and the children returned to Shanghai, Ira Wallace went to Nanking University for further study of the Chinese language. Unfortunately, he and two other Adventist missionaries were caught up in the fighting that took place during the "Nanking Outrage" by the Nationalist army on March 24, 1927.¹¹

At eight o'clock that morning, Nationalist soldiers entered their shared house demanding money and weapons. Not satisfied with Wallace's answers, the soldiers pushed him out into the street, lined him up against a wall and readied their weapons. As one of the soldiers loaded his gun, the ammunition clip jammed, frustrating and distracting them from their purpose. At this point, a young Chinese civilian came out of the gathering crowd and interceded for Wallace.

I was much surprised at my composure. Not once did I flinch, neither once did I think God would allow them to shoot. I kept a prayer on my lips and I felt God was stronger than they. I experienced a feeling I had never had before in the face of great danger, and I had never thought I could be so calm under such circumstances. Surely God was sustaining me, for it was not natural to remain so calm under such conditions.¹²

Later that morning, they were again accosted at their home by soldiers and threatened with execution. "While they were threatening yet to kill us, an old gentleman of about seventy years of age interceded for us... These soldiers evidently respected his gray hairs and left us."¹³

After Nanking, the Wallaces were assigned to the Manchurian Union Mission in Mukden, Manchuria, in Northeast China. Ira Wallace served as the field and home missionary secretary.¹⁴ During this time in Manchuria, Wallace increased book sales and the circulation of several subscription publications.

Already we have passed the twelve thousand dollar mark for the first eight months. Our goal for the year is fifteen thousand. We hope now to come very near the twenty thousand dollar mark for the year. This gain is not solely because we have more men in the field this year, for our gain in sales is about 33% in advance of our gains in the number of colporteurs in the field each month.¹⁵

Unfortunately, their youngest child, Ira Otto Wallace, Jr., developed dysentery after eating contaminated ice at an ice cream social. He died on July 28, 1928, and was buried in the International Cemetery at Mukden!¹⁶ Mary Wallace's health also deteriorated throughout the rest of 1928 and Ira Wallace reluctantly thought it best that they return to the United States.

Pioneers of the Nursing Home Healthcare Industry

Upon their return from China in 1929, Wallace went back to book selling and accepted a position as sales manager for the Southern Publishing Association (SPA), headquartered in Nashville, Tennessee. From 1932 to 1934, he served as the Kentucky-Tennessee field secretary for SPA. In 1935, he was asked to teach the psychology of salesmanship at Madison College, north of Nashville.¹⁷

In the process of selling Adventist church literature to the residents of Kentucky's isolated rural areas, Ira and Mary Wallace observed a vast need for adequate medical care for the people of these poor counties—especially the elderly. At the urging of local physicians and health care officials, they formed the Rest Harbor Rural Association in 1936. Marketed under the name of Pioneer Rural Family Service, it was based in their hometown of Lockport, Kentucky. The association established free first-aid and sickroom supply units in remote areas of eight Kentucky counties, set up free lending libraries, and sponsored the Lee Frasure Memorial Children's Home in McDowell, Kentucky. The Rest Harbor Sanitarium, under the Wallaces' administration, opened on August 1, 1947, in the converted former Estes Hotel of Lockport. It served primarily as a nursing home for invalids, chronic cases and the elderly.¹⁸

A generous donation enabled Ira and Mary Wallace to establish the New Castle Sanitarium and Maternity Hospital in 1950. "The New Castle San," as it was called locally, served as their base of operations while Ira Wallace advanced the cause of health care for the elderly throughout Kentucky and the nation.¹⁹

In 1953, Wallace founded the Kentucky Nursing Home Association, now Kentucky Association of Health Care Facilities (KAHCF), and served as its president for two years. The highest award of recognition to an administrator given annually by the KAHCF bears his name, the Ira O. Wallace Award. In addition, the KAHCF annually awards a scholarship in his name to encourage the education of long-term care health professionals in Kentucky.²⁰

Sandra Higgins Stinson, former president of KAHCF spoke of Ira's goals and achievement in a 1974 speech to the association:

Through the early years of organization and the struggle for recognition as a profession, Ira O. Wallace had one purpose, to have our facilities and programs recognized by the nation as something good for elderly people. He wanted to abolish the image and dread the aged had of nursing homes and he wanted most of all to have us recognized and acknowledged as a professional industry.²¹

Wallace was instrumental in forming other state nursing home associations through his service as secretary (1954-1956) and president (1957-1959) of the American Nursing Home Association, based in Washington, DC. In 1957, he was also elected president of the National Geriatric Society, serving for three years, and served as chairman of its National Qualifying Board, serving until his death in June of 1964. He chaired numerous additional boards and committees at the state and national levels, including the Southern Regional Conference

of the National Social Welfare Assembly's National Committee on the Aging, the American Hospital Association's Constitution Planning Committee, the Conference Committee of the National Rural Health Council, the American Academy of Medical Administrators, and the Board of Directors of the National Joint Council to Improve the Health Care of the Aged.²²

At the state governmental level, Wallace served three Kentucky governors as an advisor on long-term health care. At the federal level, he served on the Planning Committee for the U.S. Public Health Service's First National Conference on Nursing Homes and Homes for the Aged in 1958. On June 17, 1958, Wallace was invited to speak before the House of Representatives Committee on Ways and Means on behalf of the American Nursing Home Association regarding proposed amendments to the Social Security Program. He was appointed for a term of five months as consultant-advisor to the Federal Housing Administration in setting up standards, rules and regulations for administering the mortgage insurance program for nursing homes under the Housing Act of 1959. Also, in 1959, he began a three-year appointment as special consultant to the Chronic Disease Program for the U.S. Public Health Service.²³ In 1961, Wallace received a personal invitation from President Dwight D. Eisenhower to participate in the White House Conference on Aging.²⁴

Epilogue

Although Ira and Mary Wallace were active on the national stage, they chose to establish their business and make their home in small town America—New Castle, Kentucky, population 700. Seeking to follow Ellen White's admonitions about the benefits of rural living, they were, nonetheless, able to make a significant and lasting impact on how the elderly were treated.

Ira Otto Wallace died at his home on Sabbath, June 13, 1964, surrounded by his wife, children, and grandchildren.²⁵ His last words were in Chinese as his mind carried him back to the thrilling events with the Chinese people of Sianfu. Mary Wallace continued to operate the New Castle Sanitarium with her children, living until April 24, 1981.

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9. Ira O. Wallace, "Experiences at Sianfu and Nanking," unpublished memoir, 1930, personal collections of Stephen Hall and Sandra Wallace Powell, 13.

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