

# Holden, William Henry (1874–1968) and Sadie Marie (Rittenhouse) (1882–1967)

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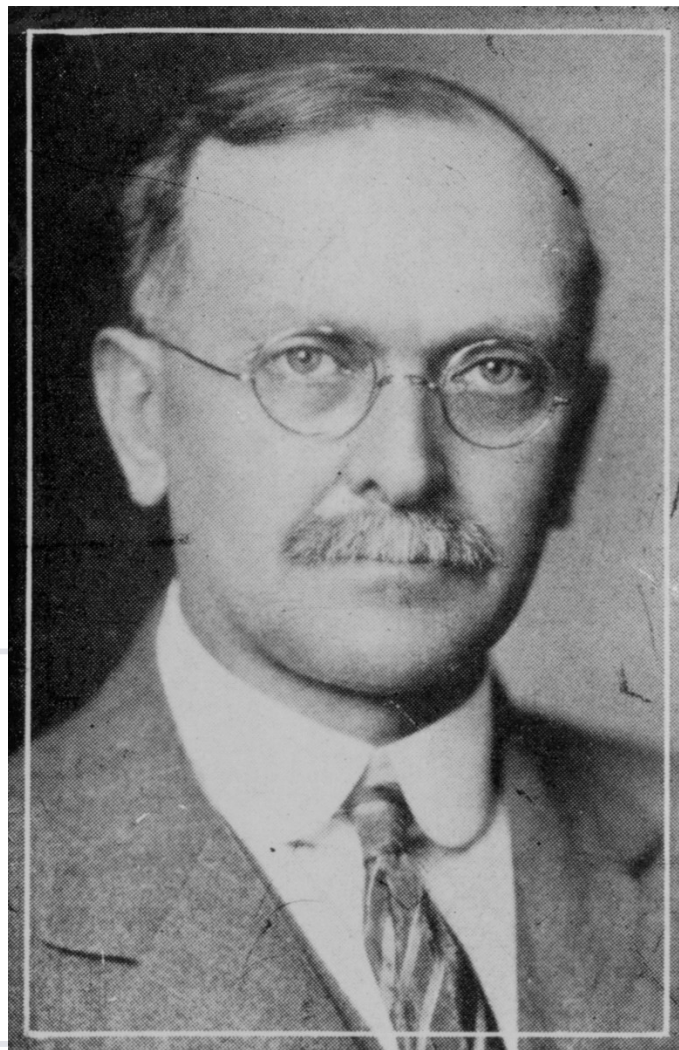
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William H. and Sadie M. Holden ministered together in the United States for more than 40 years. For many of those years, he served as a conference president and she as a conference departmental director.

## Ministry and Marriage in Montana

William Holden was born at Potsdam in St. Lawrence County, northern New York State, on April 28, 1874, to Orson (1833-1907) and Mary Dains Holden (1839-1932). He was raised on a nearby farm with three older siblings—two brothers and a sister.<sup>1</sup>

After graduating from Potsdam State Normal College in 1900, William, it was said, tied his diploma to the handlebars of his bicycle and headed West. Nothing is said about additional modes of transportation he may have used, but he ended up in Bozeman, Montana, nearly 2,000 miles away from his home. It was there that he



William Henry Holden

Photo courtesy of Center for Adventist Research.

accepted the Seventh-day Adventist message and began gospel work as a colporteur in 1903.<sup>2</sup>

Though seven and a half years younger than William, Sadie Marie Rittenhouse was already a Montanan when he arrived in the state. She was born December 28, 1882, near Ostrander, Ohio, to David W. (1844-1897) and Sallie Roberts Rittenhouse (1845-1917), the next-to-last of their ten children. In 1884 the family moved West, settling on land acquired near Hebron, North Dakota. It was there, in 1888, that David and Sallie Rittenhouse became Seventh-day Adventists. To provide their children good access to Adventist education, they decided to move once again, and in 1897 set out in a caravan of covered wagons for the vicinity of Walla Walla College in eastern Washington state. Tragically, David died en route at age 52. By winter the bereaved family made it as far as Bozeman, and ended up settling there.<sup>3</sup>

Sadie, apparently among the earliest students at a 10-grade church school in Bozeman (a predecessor to Mount Ellis Academy), began church employment in September 1903, working at the Montana Tract Society office and assisting with production of the *Montana Bivouac*, the conference paper. A few months later, in February 1904, she began a semester teaching at the Missoula, Montana, church school.<sup>4</sup>

It is probable that Sadie and William already had some acquaintance before 1905, but, be that as it may, the convergence of their ministry paths in that year gave them opportunity to become much better acquainted. In April 1905, Sadie Rittenhouse, at age 22, was called to fulfill multiple roles at the Montana Conference office in Bozeman—Sabbath School department secretary, editor of the *Bivouac*, and conference treasurer.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, William, had also been given multiple assignments after beginning full-time conference work in June 1904—pastor-evangelist, principal of the Bozeman school, and conference secretary. It should be noted that in this conference, and at that time, at least, the secretary and treasurer positions were not regarded as “executive” positions as they later would. Neither William nor Sadie served on the conference committee, for instance. Nevertheless, though it was a new administrative unit (organized 1898) in a sparsely populated western state, the Montana Conference was not an insubstantial operation. The work of its six full-time ministers, 12 churches, and 400 members, required skilled management of information and operational procedures, and these two young workers apparently seemed the best-equipped to provide it.<sup>6</sup>

It is not certain when the Montana Conference treasurer and secretary decided to marry, but perhaps they did so before Sadie returned to teaching church school in September 1906 rather than continue in her conference office responsibilities.<sup>7</sup> She and William wed in Bozeman on December 4, 1906, with conference president W. F. Martin performing the ceremony.<sup>8</sup>

At the annual camp meeting and conference session held at Helena in June 1907, W. H. Holden and Stewart Kime were “set apart to the work of the gospel ministry by prayer and the laying on of hands.” Also, three new congregations were admitted to the conference, bringing the number of churches to 15 and total membership to around 500.<sup>9</sup>

## Conference Leadership: New England and New York State

In 1908, the Holdens were called to Walla Walla College where William served as preceptor and taught Bible and history courses while Sadie taught church school. This chapter of their lives would be short, however.

Conference administration rather than education would be the focus of their careers.<sup>10</sup>

After a year at Walla Walla, William Holden returned to pastoral-evangelistic ministry in the Vermont Conference. He and Sadie moved back East in June 1909. In December, Holden was elected president of the conference, just at the point of its merger with churches in New Hampshire (previously part of the Central New England Conference) to form the Northern New England Conference. The reconfiguration had been voted by the Atlantic Union Conference in 1909, and Holden presided over a special constituency meeting at White River Junction, Vermont, January 15-16, 1910, at which the details were finalized and duly voted by representatives of the congregations involved.<sup>11</sup> The new Northern New England Conference, made up of 26 congregations with 483 members, set up its headquarters in Burlington, Vermont. Sadie Holden headed the Missionary Volunteer department.<sup>12</sup>

Holden's first presidential post thus was in a conference formed by a merger of smaller entities. However, his subsequent leadership positions throughout most of the 1910s and 1920s would illustrate an opposite trend in North America during those decades—dividing state conferences into two or more smaller conferences. The New York Conference (covering most of New York State outside of greater New York City), for example, divided into the Western New York and Eastern New York Conferences in 1906, then reunited in 1922.<sup>13</sup> Elder Holden was elected president of the latter conference in March 1912. Sadie directed the work of both the Sabbath School and Missionary Volunteer departments during the second of the couple's two years serving this conference. The Holdens left denominational employment for two years beginning in June 1914. No explanation is given in available sources. They apparently remained in the state during these years, in which William taught school. With little apparent fanfare, he returned to ministry in the Eastern New York Conference in the summer of 1916 and served on the conference executive committee.<sup>14</sup>

## Conference Leadership: Illinois and Michigan

Similar to the New York Conference, the Illinois Conference, in 1902, divided into two conferences, Northern and Southern. William Holden was called to the presidency of the Southern Illinois Conference, with headquarters in Springfield, in April 1918. Later that year, the two conferences were reconfigured into the Chicago Conference, covering the city of Chicago and nearby counties, and the Illinois Conference covering the remainder of the state.<sup>15</sup> William remained as president of the latter until 1922. Sadie served as the conference Sabbath School Department secretary for a year (1918-1919).<sup>16</sup> This would be her last official position in conference employment.

Nearly 30 years of ministry were yet ahead for the couple, all of them in the Lake Union Conference territory. During these years as much as before, Sadie, as her husband later put it, “faithfully worked by my side.”<sup>17</sup> Their only child to survive infancy, Herbert Allen (1920-2016), was born at Hinsdale Sanitarium near Chicago on August 8, 1920. He earned a medical degree at Loma Linda, served with distinction as a Navy medical officer in the Pacific Theater during World War II, and became a respected family physician in San Leandro, California.<sup>18</sup>

In 1922, the Holdens moved to Holly, Michigan, office locale for the East Michigan Conference. This was one of three conferences (along with North Michigan and West Michigan) in which the large, historic, Michigan Conference, had been divided in 1902/1903. East Michigan was the largest conference—in terms of membership—that Holden had yet been called to administer and it grew impressively during his four years as president.<sup>19</sup> At the beginning of 1922 (a few months before his arrival), the conference had 2,005 members on the church rolls. Four years later, at the outset of 1926, the membership totaled 2,672—a net growth of 33% over the four years.<sup>20</sup>

Holden accepted the presidency of the West Michigan Conference, with headquarters in Grand Rapids, in 1926. After absorbing most of the former North Michigan Conference that same year, West Michigan’s membership total reached close to 4,000 in 91 churches.<sup>21</sup>

## Lake Union President

The Lake Union Conference then elected Holden president in March 1928, the largest responsibility of his ministerial career.<sup>22</sup> At that time, the union included six conferences (Chicago, East Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, and West Michigan). The union office was located in Berrien Springs, Michigan, near its most important institution, Emmanuel Missionary College (later Andrews University). As union president, Holden chaired the college’s board of trustees.

The grave financial crisis caused by the Great Depression became the defining issue of Holden’s presidency. At the close of his second term in March 1937, Holden pointed out that the tithe returned by church members throughout the union plummeted from \$42.17 per capita in 1928 to \$16.23 in 1933. The devastating impact paralleled that experienced by the denomination as a whole. By reducing salaries and expenses, the union made it through the crisis with its conference structure and institutions intact, and for this Holden credited the loyalty of the church membership, along with the frugality and sacrificial spirit demonstrated by church workers.<sup>23</sup>

One major cost-cutting measure implemented throughout the North American Division in 1931-1932 had a lasting impact on the Lake Union. The era in which former state conferences were often divided into two or more smaller conferences came to an end. Thus, East Michigan and West Michigan joined to form a single Michigan Conference, and the Chicago Conference merged into the now statewide Illinois Conference, bringing the number of conferences in the union down to four.<sup>24</sup>

A more positive development in the Lake Union during Holden's administration was also in keeping with a broader denominational pattern in the 1930s. He was pleased to report a net growth of 33 percent in membership, from 16,191 in 1928 to 23,290 in 1937.<sup>25</sup>

## Final Years

A term limit of eight years for union conference presidents voted by the General Conference in 1931 was a factor in Holden's departure from the Lake Union presidency in 1937.<sup>26</sup> He remained within the union territory, though, and in June 1937 was elected president of the Wisconsin Conference. He declined re-election in 1940 due to deteriorating health that required several weeks' hospitalization in Madison.<sup>27</sup> However, though 66 years old by then, he did not retire. And, despite having been a conference president for 29 of the past 31 years, he seems to have welcomed a return to the role of pastor-evangelist. He continued another seven years in full-time ministry, divided evenly into three and a half years in Wisconsin and another three and a half in Michigan.<sup>28</sup>

William and Sadie Holden retired to Escondido, California, in 1947, moving to Loma Linda around 1963. She died on April 5, 1967, in Loma Linda, at the age of 84.<sup>29</sup> He spent his final days under the care of their son, Herbert, in San Leandro, and went to his rest on October 18, 1968, at age 93.<sup>30</sup> This ministering couple left a legacy of mostly unspectacular yet steady, consecrated, efficient leadership—qualities essential to the upbuilding of the 20th-century church.

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## NOTES

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