

Bresee, Floyd Edgar (1899–1994)

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Sabrina Riley was born in Auburn, New York and raised in Dowagiac, Michigan. She received a B.A. in history from Andrews University and an M.A. in information and libraries studies from the University of Michigan. Riley was a member of Andrews University's library staff from 1998 to 2003, library director and college archivist at Union College from 2003 to 2016, and is presently a freelance researcher, author, and information professional.

Floyd E. Bresee was an Adventist educator, missionary, and minister. Most notably, he was the first Seventh-day Adventist chaplain in the United States Army, serving from 1942 to about 1955.

Early Life

Floyd Edgar Bresee was born in Nunda, South Dakota, on January 27, 1899. His father, Eugene William Bresee (1865-1923), although born in Quebec, was English-Canadian,¹ and his mother, Minnie Adaline Metz Bresee (1865-1911) born in Wisconsin, was of German-American descent. The Bresees were farmers in Madison County, South Dakota. Eugene was raised in the Methodist Church. The Bresee family joined the Seventh-day Adventist Church around 1910 after attending evangelistic meetings held in a local school?² Floyd was the third of their four children which included Millie May (1893-1990), Raymond Frederick (1896-1981), and Harold Ned (1908-1986). After Minnie's death, Eugene married Zoa Florence Miller with whom he had one son, Floyd's half-brother, Willard Laverne (1916-1996).

Both Raymond and Harold became Seventh-day Adventist ministers. Raymond's son, Wilmer Floyd Bresee (1927-), who commonly used "Floyd" as his first name, was also a well-known Adventist minister who has sometimes been confused with his uncle, Floyd Edgar Bresee.

Education and Marriage



Floyd Edgar Bresee and Margaret Marie (Guymon) Bresee, around 1925. Courtesy of the Review and Herald Publishing Association Photographic Collection, General Conference Archives.

Bresee attained his elementary education at Hyland Public School. He attended Plainview Academy in Redfield, South Dakota, from 1914 to 1918. Following graduation Bresee became first a colporteur (literature evangelist) for the South Dakota Conference, and then an evangelist/pastor. Between 1919 and 1931, he took a number of leaves to study at Union College.

Bresee married Ruth Katherine Rhoads (1898-1920) on August 28, 1918.³ This marriage made him a brother-in-law to Norma Rhoads Youngberg, the much-loved author of mission stories.⁴ Floyd and Ruth enrolled at Union College together in the fall of 1919. Ruth studied music while Floyd began worked toward a Bachelor of Arts degree.⁵ Tragically, Ruth contracted pneumonia the following winter and died on February 6, 1920. She was pregnant at the time, and the baby died with her.⁶

Subsequently, on March 21, 1922, Bresee married Margaret Marie Guymon (1898-1990),⁷ a colporteur and stenographer for the South Dakota Conference.⁸ Their marriage ended in divorce in 1946. He then married Thora Eileen Landon Townsend née Feiberg (1919-2005), a widow with two sons, around 1947. Their marriage produced two more sons, Thomas Edgar Bresee (1948-⁹) and William E. Bresee (1951-). However, this marriage also ended in divorce.¹⁰

Bresee eventually completed his Bachelor's degree from Union College in 1931. He also earned a Master of Arts in history from the University of Nebraska in 1937.¹¹

Early Career

While still in academy, Bresee worked as a colporteur in South Dakota during the summers. Following graduation, he served as an evangelist in the same state from 1918 to 1923, with two study leaves spent at Union College in Lincoln, Nebraska. His efforts in South Dakota included the towns of Platte, Geddes, Heckla, Clark, Mobridge, Gregory, and Huron. The meetings in Geddes in 1918 were cut short by the influenza pandemic. Bresee was ordained in 1922 in Huron, South Dakota, where he was the church pastor. In 1923 he transferred to the Iowa Conference where he pastored the Sioux City church and superintended the conference's northwestern district. The following year he returned to evangelistic efforts that included meetings in Sergeant Bluff, Iowa, which resulted in the formation of a new company of believers.¹²

In 1925, Bresee accepted a call to South America where he served as superintendent of the Lake Titicaca Mission until 1932. From 1933 until 1935, he led the Peruvian Mission, and from 1935 to 1936, he served as superintendent of the Inca Union Mission. While on furlough in 1930 to 1931, Bresee taught Spanish at Union College.¹³

While on furlough in the United States in 1936, the Bresees' requested a permanent return home. Floyd became principal of Union College Academy (now College View Academy) in 1937 where he also taught religion and history until 1942.¹⁴

In the United States Army

As World War II developed, Bresee became interested in military chaplaincy. While the General Conference had appointed camp pastors to support Adventist servicemen in training camps, there were no official Seventh-day Adventist chaplains in any of the Armed Forces. Given the size of church membership in 1942, the Adventist Church was entitled to two Adventist chaplains in the Army. The General Committee on Army and Navy Chaplains, the organization responsible for recruiting and vetting Protestant chaplains, desired to include Adventist chaplains. However, the General Conference was reticent to provide the required ecclesiastical endorsements that were required, citing concerns about the separation of Church and State as well as a conflict of interest between the Church's and the military's expectations.¹⁵

Bresee, apparently unaware of the required ecclesiastical endorsement, submitted his application to the Army Chief of Chaplains with several letters of recommendation from Union College board and faculty members. When more recommendations were requested, he turned to the governor of Nebraska and the chancellor of the University of Nebraska, but this was not what the Chief of Chaplains wanted. Bresee next turned to Carlyle B. Haynes, War Service Commission secretary for the General Conference. Haynes was sympathetic to Bresee's desire to serve as an army chaplain, but given the General Conference's ambivalence, was uncertain about providing an ecclesiastical endorsement. It was eventually settled that the Central Union Conference, Bresee's direct employer, should write a letter "To Whom It May Concern" stating that Bresee was a minister in good standing with the Seventh-day Adventist Church. In this roundabout way, Bresee became the first recognized Seventh-day Adventist chaplain in the United States Armed Forces. Taking a four-year leave of absence from Union College, Bresee was commissioned a first lieutenant on September 28, 1942.¹⁶

Bresee trained with the Chaplain Corps at Harvard University in the fall of 1942, where Margaret accompanied him.¹⁷ Over the next three years, he served consecutively in the 69th Ordinance Battalion, the 122nd Station Hospital, and the 25th Evacuation Hospital. The majority of this time was with the latter unit in the South Pacific Theater where he was often the only chaplain for a hospital that cared for 23,000 patients during his tenure.¹⁸ Bresee wrote home about the work he was doing. Frequently, he was at the bedside of dying soldiers, praying for them and witnessing their deathbed conversions. He wrote to Margaret of this experience, "Never thought I'd care much for this work, but I like it. Here I feel I can do my best work, a definite lasting work."¹⁹

By the time Bresee separated from the Army on August 18, 1946,²⁰ he had achieved the rank of major. From 1946 to 1948, Bresee briefly returned to teach at Union College. This time he directed the secondary education training, psychology, and Bureau of Vocational Guidance and Placement.

In 1948, Bresee was reactivated for military service and assigned to Fort Hood, Texas.²¹ Following Fort Hood, he was assigned to Johnson Air Base in Japan. He later spent time at Camp Pickett, Virginia, and finally Fort Sam Houston, Texas.²² Fort Sam Houston was a particularly important posting for Bresee. It was here that the Army established the Army Service Forces Training Center (Medical) to train Army medics, a significant number of

which were Seventh-day Adventists.²³

Bresee's military medals and awards included six Overseas Bars, an Asiatic Pacific Theatre Service medal with one Bronze Star, a Philippine Liberation Medal with one Bronze Star, a World War II Victory Medal, an Army of Occupation Medal-Japan, the Philippine Presidential Unit Citation, and Armed Forces Reserve Medal, a Philippine Independence Ribbon, a National Defense Service medal, and an American Campaign Medal. According to his obituary, he was a retired lieutenant colonel; however, the rank engraved on his grave stone is that of major. Thus, the lieutenant colonel rank may have been honorary rather than substantive.²⁴

Effect of Divorce

While Bresee's divorce from Margaret—litigated in Oregon where she was living and settled two months before his discharge from the Army in 1946²⁵—seems to have had no adverse impact on his career, his divorce from Eileen ended his career. The precise circumstances of the divorce are unknown, but they led to disciplinary action by the General Conference. On May 12, 1955, the General Conference Committee voted to revoke Bresee's ministerial credentials and annul his ordination. The committee also recommend that he be disfellowshipped. At the same time, \$2,000 from the General Conference's Contingency Fund was settled on Eileen to help care for their two sons.²⁶ Without denominational credentials, Bresee could no longer serve as an Army chaplain.

Later Years

Bresee married Audrey Ann Benard on October 22, 1955, in Carson City, Nevada.²⁷ In 1962, they moved to Madison, South Dakota, where they were active members of the local Seventh-day Adventist church. Floyd's long interest in raising Cochin chickens²⁸ may have been the impetus for the Bresees to buy a farm. They were also active in the local Republican Party as well as American Legion.²⁹ Floyd was also a member of Phi Delta Kappa, the Kiwanis Club, and the Ministerial Association.³⁰ In 1969, he was appointed by the South Dakota Governor Frank Farrar to serve on the state's Human Relations Commission.³¹ Floyd Bresee died on November 14, 1994, and was buried with military honors in Graceland Cemetery, Madison, South Dakota.

Legacy

Bresee paved the way for Adventists ministers to become military chaplains. His successful career, despite any personal failures, demonstrated that a Seventh-day Adventist minister could be faithful to the Church while ministering to service members and their families. Supported by Adventist Chaplaincy Ministries, military chaplaincy is now viewed as a viable career path for Adventist ministers, and Adventist chaplains are well-respected in the United States Armed Forces.

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