

Spears, Byron Reginald, Sr. (1912–2013)

CLINTON LINDO III

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Byron R. Spears, who became known as “The Walking Bible” for his remarkable ability to quote Scripture, was a prominent evangelist connected with the Northern California Conference, the Pacific Union Conference, and the Voice of Prophecy Evangelistic Association.

Early Years

Born on July 3, 1912, in Topeka, Kansas, Byron

Spears was the youngest child of Carl Frederick Spears (1885-1945) and Ollie Green Spears (1886-1967). His older siblings were Virginia Bertha (1907-1965) and Carl Frederick, Jr. (1910-1986).¹ The Spears family belonged to the Episcopalian Church, where Byron was an altar boy. He, his brother, and his sister attended Buchanan Elementary School, Holy Name Catholic School and Assumption High Catholic School in Topeka.²

Byron displayed an inclination toward ministry as early as age five, when he got his brother Carl to sit along with stuffed animals and dolls on chairs set up in the backyard and listen to him preach. Byron also did funerals for his pets when they died.³

During his early years and after high school, Spears worked as a “barker,” paid to walk around the neighborhood shouting the prices and sales for the egg and butter deliveries. While he was a teenager, he got ahold of a Gideon Bible and read it all the way through. He also discovered Seventh-day Adventist literature. He felt challenged by what he read and was convicted to truly serve God and follow His Word in its entirety.⁴



Byron R. Spears

Photo courtesy of Pam. Source: *Find a Grave*,

<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/145262768/byron-reginald-spears>

In 1929, while he was thus immersing himself in Scripture, Byron met Marthella Irene Evans (1911-1981), a biology major at Washburn University in Topeka.⁵ They married August 19, 1930.⁶ Byron was ready to join the Adventist church right after their marriage but Marthella, a Methodist, initially was resistant. After she became convinced for herself about the church's message, they were baptized as a couple in 1934 at College Avenue Seventh-day Adventist Church.⁷ They would have five children: Byron, Jr. (b. 1931), Rosemary (b. 1933), Marlene (b. 1939), Carl (b. 1947), and Sharon (b. 1950).⁸

Lay Evangelist and Entrepreneur

Around the time of his baptism, 21-year-old Spears gave his first sermon. Taking "Wisdom" as his topic, he was said to have quoted every passage about wisdom in the Bible, showcasing his memorization abilities with "a loud, eloquent and commanding delivery." Soon thereafter, he was elected head elder of the College Avenue church and went on to serve the congregation in this capacity for 10 years.⁹

Spears suffered a major setback when he contracted polio in 1936. Told he had only 12-18 months to live, Spears persisted through a long and difficult rehabilitation and survived with the ability to walk, albeit with canes. Forced by the illness to give up his job as a bellhop at the Jayhawk Hotel, Spears started his own business, the Topeka Bottle and Junk Company. The business helped meet the demand for bottles and scrap metal during the Depression and World War II.¹⁰

Along with running his business, Spears preached frequently as a lay evangelist, both at Adventist venues and in the churches of various other denominations. Ironically, it was after hearing him speak at a Methodist church that Adventist conference officials, their presence unknown to Spears, affirmed his calling to full-time gospel ministry.¹¹

Career in Public Evangelism

The Kansas Conference issued him a ministerial license in 1944, assigning him to the Wabash Avenue Church in Wichita. His evangelistic efforts led to the addition of 21 new members by the time the church building was dedicated on December 30, 1944. He was ordained to gospel ministry in 1946, and transferred to Kansas City, Kansas, where the church membership grew from 80 to more than 250 over the next three years.¹²

In 1949, Spears accepted a call from the Northern California Conference to conduct evangelism targeting cities with a substantial African-American population. One such city was Stockton, where Spears' endeavors led to organization of a new church at Market and F Streets within a year of his arrival.¹³ His campaign in 1951 raised up the Capital City Church in Sacramento.¹⁴ Another major success took place in 1956 when Black Adventist pastors and Bible workers in the conference formed the Bay Area Evangelistic Committee to coordinate meetings conducted in Oakland Auditorium, with Spears preaching.¹⁵ By 1961, Spears had conducted an

evangelistic campaign in every major city in the Northern California Conference territory.¹⁶

In 1968 Spears was appointed evangelist for the Pacific Union Conference. His two years in this role included a campaign in Los Angeles that was one of the most numerically successful of his career, bringing 164 new members into the Seventh-day Adventist Church.¹⁷

Spears was called to be part of the Voice of Prophecy (VOP) evangelistic team in 1970. For much of the subsequent decade, Spears worked with various singing evangelists in holding efforts lasting three months each throughout the United States, Canada and Bermuda.¹⁸

Later Years

In 1981, Marthella, Elder Spears' wife of 51 years, passed away due to cancer. It was a devastating loss, and Spears retired from the VOP later that year. On February 14, 1982, Spears married Lone Owens-Taylor (1937-2010) in Los Angeles. They made their home in Gold Canyon, Arizona. During his retirement years Spears continued to hold evangelistic campaigns at the invitation of conferences throughout the North American Division.¹⁹

After 28 years of marriage, Lone died in 2010, and Elder Spears' children moved their 97-year-old father to Burbank, California, to be closer to his family. Despite declining health, he gave Bible studies to friends and fellow residents of the assisted living center where he resided. He occasionally preached at local churches until age 99.²⁰

Elder Byron R. Spears died in Burbank on January 29, 2013, at the age of 100.²¹ He used his prodigious memory and speaking ability to proclaim the teachings of the Bible for nearly 80 years, 65 of them as an ordained minister. He was noted for spreading joy wherever he went on his evangelistic mission,²² leading countless lives to living faith in Christ and building up churches that remained vital centers of faith for decades to come.

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NOTES

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3. Ibid.
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5. Washburn University, Kaw Yearbook, (Topeka, KS: 1930), 130, E-Yearbook, <https://www.e-yearbook.com/sp/eybb?school=50774&year=1930&highlight=130&startpage=130>, November 8, 2021
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7. "Marthella Irene 'Mart' Evans Spears," *Find A Grave*, Memorial ID 145262812, April 19, 2015, accessed April 9, 2023, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/145262812/marthella-irene-spears>.
8. "Spears Farewell Service Program."
9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. According to the life sketch in Spears' "Farewell Service" program, he was ordained on June 18, 1944, by Nathaniel C. Wilson, then president of the Central Union Conference. However, listings in the *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* for the years 1944 to 1947 indicate that Spears first held the ministerial license—the credential granted to beginning or interning ministers—in 1944, and then became an ordained minister in 1946. Regarding his work in Wichita and Kansas City, Kansas, see also N.C. Wilson, "Dedication Of Wabash Avenue Wichita Church," *Central Union Reaper*, January 9, 1945, 2; J. Norman Porter, "Evangelistic Meetings Draw Continuous Record Crowds," *Central Union Reaper*, November 25, 1947, 4.
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22. Byron R. Spears Jr., interview by Clinton Lindo, November 7, 2021.

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