

# Wilkinson, George Llewellyn (1890–1942) and Nellie (Buchanan) (1892–1983)

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George L. Wilkinson with his family. This photo was likely taken by Alton Hughes.

Photo courtesy of Barry Mahorney.

## MILTON HOOK

Milton Hook, Ed.D. (Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, the United States). Hook retired in 1997 as a minister in the Greater Sydney Conference, Australia. An Australian by birth Hook has served the Church as a teacher at the elementary, academy and college levels, a missionary in Papua New Guinea, and as a local church pastor. In retirement he is a conjoint senior lecturer at Avondale College of Higher Education. He has authored *Flames Over Battle Creek*, *Avondale: Experiment on the Dora*, *Desmond Ford: Reformist Theologian, Gospel Revivalist* the *Seventh-day Adventist Heritage Series*, and many magazine articles. He is married to Noeleen and has two sons and three grandchildren.

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George Wilkinson served almost three years with the Nevada Mission prior to extended ministry in China. He and his wife, Nellie, were exceptionally proficient in their work, leading out in the South Chekiang (Zhejiang) Mission, the West China Union Mission and the Honan (Henan) Mission.

## Heritage and Education

George Llewellyn Wilkinson was the eldest of three children born to Charles and Jennie Lydia Lovinia (Butler) Wilkinson. He was born on November 10, 1890, at Blencoe, western Iowa.<sup>1</sup> His siblings were Edith May (b. 1895) and Harry Butler (b. 1901). They were raised on farms in Blencoe and Sherman, Iowa, and in Modesto, California, where they specialized in growing alfalfa.<sup>2</sup> At the age of nine, George was baptized by Elder George Starr in Des Moines, Iowa.<sup>3</sup>

The childhood and teenage years for George were occupied in both public and church schools. He attended Union College, Nebraska, for one year and Pacific Union College for three years, graduating in the Ministerial Class of 1915.<sup>4</sup>

## Church Career

During the summers while on breaks from his college studies, George sold Adventist books in the Northern California Conference. In the Fall of 1915, he joined the pastoral team of the fledgling Nevada Mission.<sup>5</sup> For three years, he engaged in evangelism while located at Reno,<sup>6</sup> Elko,<sup>7</sup> Winnemucca,<sup>8</sup> and Fallon.<sup>9</sup> On May 20, 1917, he married Nellie Buchanan in Butte, California. Elder G. W. Rich performed their ceremony.<sup>10</sup> George was ordained during the 1918 General Conference Session.<sup>11</sup> At those same meetings, he and Nellie were appointed to mission service in China.<sup>12</sup>

George and Nellie arrived in Shanghai in May 1918.<sup>13</sup> They spent the summer at Moganshan in the mountains of Zhejiang Province studying the Wenchow (Wenzhou) dialect. They then located at the city of Wenzhou. George directed the South Chekiang Mission and for Nellie to act as Sabbath School secretary.<sup>14</sup> Some pioneering work had been done by others. George and Nellie sought to expand the number of congregations and adherents. At the time, there were 31 baptized members in two separate chapels, one at Wenchow and another at Ngo Tsing. Within 12 months, George had established two more congregations, the first at Ong Jia and a second one at Bing Yi. Scattered pockets of believers met in 20 other locations, and membership rose to 100. George also established an elementary school with 25 students.<sup>15</sup> Soon after, he organized a company of believers at Shi Pai, high in the mountains where no other foreigners had visited.<sup>16</sup> He eventually moved the school away from the city and up into the mountains. Students earned their tuition by weaving cloth and doing cross-stitch needlecraft to market.<sup>17</sup>

One of the strengths of the Wilkinson team was the fact that they were content to stay with the Wenchow people for an extended period of time. Having learned the language, they used it to their advantage for 15 years. One year, 1927/1928, George reported a further eight mission stations were opened.<sup>18</sup> By 1931, there were over 2,000 individuals attending Sabbath School.<sup>19</sup>

On March 18, 1932, George and Nellie, together with their two sons, George Charles (b. 1923) and Melvin Theodore (b. 1926), sailed from Shanghai for a furlough in America.<sup>20</sup> They returned in 1933. George was under appointment to be the director of the West China Union Mission. His territory included the provinces of Kweichow (Guizhou), Szechwan (Sichuan), Sikang (Xikang), Yunnan, and Tibet. His headquarters were located in Chungking (Chongqing), Sichuan Province. There were 28 organized churches throughout the territory with a baptized membership of 1,530. A dispensary functioned in Tatsienlu (Tachienlu) in the far west of Sichuan Province, specially rendering medical assistance for the largely Tibetan population.<sup>21</sup> This developed into a small hospital.<sup>22</sup> Pioneer evangelism was also conducted in Yunnan Province, many families burning their idols and

forming congregations in newly-built chapels.<sup>23</sup>

The Wilkinsons returned to America in 1939 for another furlough. Except for some intestinal parasites, their medical examinations reported that their “physical condition is excellent” and their “strength is good.”<sup>24</sup> George and Nellie departed again for China on May 24, 1940, aboard the “Tatsu Maru.”<sup>25</sup> On this occasion, George was assigned to be the director of the Honan (Henan) Mission with headquarters in Yencheng (Yancheng). His responsibilities included the supervision of ten churches and 25 smaller companies, having a total baptized membership of 1,100.<sup>26</sup>

Henan Province was embroiled in war in 1941. Constant air raids troubled Nellie so much that she was given leave to return to America. She departed Hong Kong on June 17 and arrived safely in San Francisco early July 1941.<sup>27</sup> George bravely stayed behind despite the dangerous conditions.<sup>28</sup> Only on rare occasions could letters pass through postal channels to Nellie in California.<sup>29</sup> In one letter, George told of someone stealing his suitcase containing all his clothes and shoes while travelling to visit outlying mission stations.<sup>30</sup>

Greater tragedy overtook George later. On August 6, 1942, he set out from his base at Yencheng to visit church members at Hsaio Yao (Xiao Yao) with plans to celebrate the Lord’s Supper with them. He had completed two similar trips and had rested for two weeks before leaving for a third trip. It was very hot, reaching 100°F or more during the day. He went without breakfast, but knowing he needed to hydrate, he drank several glasses of cold water before starting out on his bicycle. He rested by the roadside several times. Two farmers saw him, one kindly gave him more water, another provided him some watermelon. He pressed on, walking with his bicycle because it had a flat tyre. The path led down into a dry irrigation ditch. He descended into it but found he was too exhausted to pull out of it. He decided to rest while a farmer went to get help from the church members. George had no real protection from the sun and suffered heat stroke. He lay at the bottom of the ditch for approximately 30 minutes before some medical help arrived. They sponged him. They did artificial respiration. They injected him with a stimulant. However, within 20 minutes, he faded and passed away. They carried his body back to Xiao Yao, and he was laid to rest beside the little chapel after an appropriate service by a national minister.<sup>31</sup>

## Left to Mourn

Nellie was devastated by the tragic news of George’s untimely passing. She herself experienced a health scare several months after her loss. She was diagnosed with tuberculosis,<sup>32</sup> but recovered after treatment. She found employment at Pacific Union College as an art teacher and later devoted herself to self-supporting Bible work in California. She retired close to Los Angeles. Her long and fruitful life came to a close in Newbury Park, California, on August 3, 1983, having out-lived her eldest son, George.<sup>33</sup> She rests in Glen Haven Memorial Park, Sylmar, north of the city of Los Angeles.<sup>34</sup>

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