

Tripp, George Byron (1853–1897)

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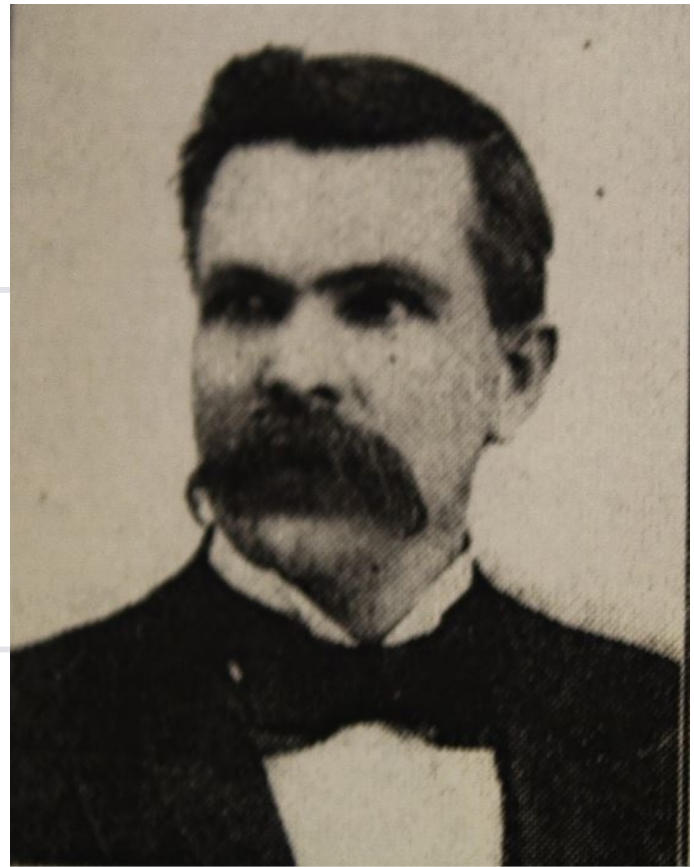
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George Byron Tripp was an American Seventh-day Adventist pioneer missionary who served as the first superintendent of Solusi Mission in Zimbabwe.

Early Life, Marriage and Ministry

George Byron Tripp was born in Minnesota, United States of America, in 1853. He seems to have spent his early childhood and schooling years in his home state. Tripp's career and ministry began in Minnesota.¹ Mrs. W. B. White, who knew him during those early years in ministry, referred to him as "our early fellow-laborer in Minnesota."² In 1879 he was listed as superintendent of the West Union Sabbath School in the Minnesota Association.³ In 1883 and 1886 he served as a member of the Minnesota Conference executive committee.⁴ In 1884 he was granted a colporteur's license, and he later worked as a ministerial licentiate in several counts within Minnesota from 1885⁵ to 1890. While serving in District No. 7, Tripp functioned as the district director in 1885.⁶ For two years, 1889-1890, Tripp worked in Cass Count, Fargo, and Grand Forks, North Dakota, before returning to Sauk Centre in Minnesota in 1891. There he served as a minister, probably having received his ordination.

Tripp was a fervent soul winner. In company with other evangelists, he held annual tent meetings. He conducted evangelistic campaigns in Parker, South Dakota, in January 1885;⁷ in Pelican Rapids, Minnesota, for two months starting July 9, 1886, accompanied by his wife Alice;⁸ and in St. Paul, Minnesota, where they distributed 15,000 pages of tracts in July 1887.⁹



G.B. Tripp

Photo from W.H. Anderson's book *On the Trail of Livingstone*.

While still a licentiate, Tripp actively participated in the annual sessions of the Minnesota Conference, as evidenced by his membership on the Resolutions Committee during the twelfth session held at Lake Harriet, Minnesota, beginning June 23, 1886.¹⁰ In 1888 and 1889, Tripp served on the Nominating Committee of the Health and Temperance Society during its annual sessions.¹¹ When he moved to Minneapolis, where he arrived on December 28, 1887 to replace departing missionary Elder H. P. Holser, Tripp found the work to be new to him and his family but accepted the challenge, trusting in God. Since the mission treasury was low at that time, he appealed for donations in the form of flour, fruits, and other provisions, including feed for a cow or horse.¹²

While Tripp and his family were stationed at Sauk Centre, his wife Alice suffered from a prolonged bout of consumption (tuberculosis). She died at age 32 on May 18, 1891, leaving behind her husband and their young son, George.¹³ Later, in 1894, Tripp went to serve as president of the Virginia Conference, at age 41.¹⁴

In 1894 a call from Cape Town, South Africa reached the General Conference headquarters requesting “for men and means to open the work among the Matabeles [sic].”¹⁵ In 1895, the General Conference Foreign Mission Board voted that G. B. Tripp be appointed superintendent, and with three others, go at once to the mission farm in Rhodesia (present-day Zimbabwe). W. B. White would later write, “the Minnesota Conference gave to the native work in Africa one of its most consecrated and promising young ministers in the person of Elder Byron Tripp.”¹⁶ Tripp married Mary Mortensen in March 1895, just before they departed America for South Africa with his twelve-year old son, George.¹⁷

The missionary team to Africa consisted of the Tripps, William H. and Nora Anderson of Indiana, and Dr A. S. Carmichael, an unmarried physician from California, who was also the oldest member of the team at age 60. They left New York on April 10, 1895 and arrived in Cape Town on May 8. After two weeks of rest they started for north by railroad, arriving at Mafeking (now Mahikeng) early on Sunday morning May 26.¹⁸ Here they spent another week waiting for their freight to arrive.

On June 2, the group harnessed their oxen and started north through Bechuanaland (now Botswana), covering about 500 miles in seven weeks, until they arrived at Solusi on Friday, July 26, 1895. Here they joined Fred Sparrow, E. J. Harvey, Pieter Wessels, Barry Burton, and A. Goepp who were in the advance party to begin work at the farm, situated about 40 kilometers west of Bulawayo. Virgil Robinson reveals that “[t]he first arrivals – Harvey, Goepp, Landsman, Burton, and Sparrow – had each pegged out a three thousand morgen [about 6,300 acres] farm, approximately half the size of the one Rhodes had given for the mission.”¹⁹

During the Sabbath worship service on the second day following their arrival, George Tripp and Dr. Carmichael explained to the people briefly why they had come to Africa. According to Virgil Robinson, “Tripp emphasized they were in Africa for the sole purpose of helping the people. Carmichael told them he had come to care for them when they were sick.”²⁰ In the afternoon, Tripp and his missionary colleagues patrolled a small portion of the farm, finding it quite different from anything they had ever seen before. “Scrub brush and stunted trees stretched to the horizon.”²¹

Tripp was determined to prove that his appointment to open the first mission among the indigenous people of Africa at Solusi was not a mistake. His career and ministry at Solusi Mission may be summed up in the following few words: adversity, tenacity, and ultimate sacrifice. A second survey of the farm occurred two days later after their arrival. *Umfundisi* (Pastor), as Tripp was known in the Ndebele language, was somewhat dismayed, though not deterred by the amount of work that lay ahead of him. He saw that the farmland as a whole was not arable. Large portions of it were full of gigantic kopjes, mounds jutting up from the earth. The few available trees were leafless, the nearest stream of water was three miles away, and the soil on the 12,000-acre farm was very poor. According to Anderson, the next three months were spent in trading with the local community, marketing grain, building houses, and preparing the land for the rainy season.²² Tripp realized that whatever food provisions the missionaries had imported into the country on their maiden journey would soon run out and he therefore mapped out a sustainable way to replenish these with local foods. Consequently, he set out to prepare enough land for both subsistence and commercial cultivation. But this was not by any means easy. Huge boulders lay just below the surface, and these had to be removed to make plowing possible.

To further compound the already difficult situation, there was no labor to hire for this enormous task, and Tripp and his colleagues had to work in the heat by themselves, as temperatures rose above 40 degrees Celsius. There was also the threat of tropical diseases, and chief among them at Solusi was malaria.

Nevertheless, to get things going at the mission farm, Tripp realized it was important to keep communication lines open between the Cape and the mission station. Robinson wrote, "Mail arrived by train from the Cape to Mafeking, and thereafter to Bulawayo. No effort was made by the postmaster to sort it out and send it to the addressees. Instead, it was thrown into a heap on the floor, and anyone might claim his own."²³ Tripp decided to help the situation to prevent the loss of mission mail. He supplied the postmaster with a box and requested him to put all Solusi mail into it, but it was not without costs. He paid five dollars per week for the service.²⁴

Moreover, there was the prospect of renewed warfare. In 1893 the Ndebele had suffered a defeat in the war with the British, and their king had disappeared beyond the Shangani River. Chief Mlevu of the Kalanga people visited the mission towards the end of January 1896 to warn Tripp privately that there was trouble ahead. The Ndebele people were on the verge of revolt. Tripp took the warning seriously. On March 22, 1896, Anderson was in Bulawayo when he learned that "the natives were in rebellion and that forty white men had been killed in the Matoppa [sic] Hills the previous night."²⁵

The next Sunday Tripp went into Bulawayo to consult with military intelligence on the matter, and he was advised to return to the mission to await further advice. Their only safety was fleeing into the city. That night Tripp returned to the farm. The next day Tripp called together all the local people of the farm and warned them what would happen to them if they took part in the rebellion, and that Christ was the Prince of peace. They all heeded the warning, and none of them had any part in the war.²⁶

With the help of the Native Commissioner an escort of thirteen armed men was sent from Bulawayo to the farm to escort the missionaries into the city. Before they left, Chief Mlevu assured Tripp that the mission property, including cattle, would be taken care of. True to his promise the chief hid the property in a cave west of the mission station (a cave that today has become a part of the church heritage at Solusi). On arriving in town, the missionaries camped near the hospital at first. Later they were ordered to move to a vacant lot in the center of town. There they "spent six long, weary weeks, with little food, less money, and no comfort."²⁷

The excursion to Bulawayo lasted a painful seven months. From March to September 1, 1895, Tripp and Anderson occasionally each occasionally visited the farm to replenish their dwindling food supplies, as well as to keep an eye on the mission station. When the war finally came to an end, Tripp led the missionaries back to the mission on September 2 to start all over again.²⁸

In 1896 Dr. Leander Starr Jameson, Administrator of Rhodesia, led a military mission across the Limpopo to overthrow the Boer Republic, but he and his troops were taken prisoner. This left Rhodesia defenseless and vulnerable to internal strife, including a Ndebele revolt. Meanwhile, a locust invasion left the country on the verge of starvation. Anderson estimated that the famine was a thousand times worse than the war. During this period, the wages of the missionaries were very low, as Anderson's records shows "G. B. Tripp and wife \$15.00 per week. W. H. Anderson and wife \$13.00 per week.. Dr Carmichael \$10.00 per week."²⁹ The Ndebele people attributed the famine to the anger of the spirits against the white people.³⁰ The famine only ceased with the onset of the harvest at the beginning of April 1897.

The third calamity was an unprecedented outbreak of rinderpest, a viral disease affecting livestock. To try to control it, the government ordered the killing of all affected cattle. The local people accused the whites of trying to impoverish them.³¹ Tripp described the desperate situation of the local people:

A few months ago the natives were all comparatively comfortable in their primitive way, with plenty to eat, and in this mild climate did not suffer from the cold. But they were not satisfied; they saw that their rights were not all respected, and their homes not held as sacred as they desired, so not being instructed in a better way, they arose in arms to avenge their real or imaginary wrongs. . . . Today, as a result of this mistaken course, their homes are desolated, burned by the soldiers as they sought to subdue the rebellion. More than this, to keep it from sustaining the natives in their efforts against the white men. Their cattle either died with the rinderpest or were taken by the soldiers. Sheep, goats, and fowls were also taken, and now that the natives have seen that they must surrender, they return to their homes with nothing; and starvation is not far from many.³²

Those at the farm who did not participate in the war were spared the soldiers' reprisals. Meanwhile, building work at the mission had commenced, and a man was hired to make bricks.

On September 1, 1897, Frank B. Armitage arrived at Solusi with his wife, Anna, and their nine-year-old daughter Violet. The railway line reached Bulawayo in November 1897, and the missionaries were favored by the visit of

former General Conference President O. A. Olsen, Anna Armitage's brother, who soon became concerned that the missionaries were wearing themselves out with overwork. Dr. Kate Lindsay from Battle Creek Sanitarium came as well, and taught health classes in the community.³³

Sadly, *Umfundisi* Tripp did not live to see the fruits of his labors. The missionaries soon found themselves stricken with malaria. While ill, Tripp shared a dream he'd had with his colleagues: "I have dreamed that sometime in the future after I am gone a long row of native huts will be built along that row of trees back of the house, and I dreamed also that they were full of native boys attending school."³⁴

Tripp's colleagues urged him to head south to the Cape where he would have a greater chance of recovery. Feeling that doing so would only leave more work for others, Tripp stayed. Having been raised in Indiana, where malaria was endemic, Anderson recognized the signs of malaria, and purchased quinine, the only treatment then known for the disease. Though the Andersons took the medicine, their fellow missionaries rejected it, believing the drug too dangerous, and that to use it would show they lacked faith.³⁵

In mid-February 1898, Dr. Carmichael became bed-ridden. He died February 26. Byron Tripp succumbed to malaria on March 7, and young Anna Sparrow died soon after. Fifteen-year-old George died April 2. When Mary Tripp became ill, she headed to South Africa with Nora Anderson and Dr. George Replogle, a physician from Claremont Sanitarium who had tried to aid the missionaries. In South Africa, Mary gradually regained her health.

Anna Armitage died after traveling to Kimberley, South Africa with her husband and daughter. At Solusi, John Ntaba, a faithful worker from Zululand in South Africa, died of suspected food poisoning.³⁶

In February 1899 Mary Mortensen Tripp married Frank Armitage. In 1901 they established Somabula Mission.

His Legacy

Tripp is fondly remembered for introducing basic reading lessons for African children, as his vision was that of helping the indigenous people to read the Bible on their own. Robinson testified to the tremendous success of Tripp's pastoral ministry at Solusi within a very short time: "Attendance of Sabbath meetings increased steadily. The hut, built to accommodate one hundred persons, became too small to care for the people from the surrounding kraals, and soon they were meeting under the trees. Looking forward to the rains the missionaries persuaded the Africans to assist in erecting a larger building."³⁷

In 1914 White wrote, "Elder Tripp's dream has been realized; the long row of huts is there today and are full of native boys attending the school. The bright vision he saw of the future, others are realizing in their work."³⁸

Robinson summed up the sacrifice made by Tripp and the other six pioneering missionaries at Solusi:

The land on which Solusi was founded had indeed been a free gift, but that was the only free thing about it. Everything else was paid for in toil, sweat, sorrow, disappointment, heartbreaks and death. Elder W. A. Spicer

wrote concerning it, 'No Missionary enterprise we have ever started since has had to endure so savage a trial.'³⁹

Mrs. W. B. White wrote, "Solusi holds a place of its own in our hearts . . . It is the mother of our African missions, a large number of our workers on other stations having had their first experience there Brother Tripp, the founder and first superintendent, with Doctor Carmichael - are resting in God's acre just beyond the church."⁴⁰

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