

# Matteson, John Gottlieb (1835–1896)

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John Gottlieb Matteson (b. Johannes Gottlieb Mathiesen) was a minister, editor, and pioneer missionary in Scandinavia. Born into a nominally Lutheran family in Langeland, Denmark, he had the advantage of a good literary and musical education, in which he also learned English (from his former postmaster boss who encouraged him to emigrate to the U.S.A.) and German (at school). On his initiative he, his parents, and two sisters emigrated to the USA in 1854 together with a group of 20 others. Matteson was the leader of the group as he knew English.

In New Denmark, Brown County, Wisconsin, the family built a log cabin on a 20-acre timber lot and lived the hard life of new settlers on the frontier.<sup>1</sup> His first step in becoming a Christian was to stop drinking alcohol, which he did in order to not waste his hard-earned money like so many of the other young Scandinavian men in the work force.

Matteson was invited to a prayer meeting by a neighbor and went along without knowing what it was. As his host didn't know how to pray either, it turned out to be a cozy, social meeting, discussing points of belief over cups of coffee while smoking their pipes, but it was a beginning. In this connection he read a book that impressed him deeply; he then asked himself: "Why can't you too become a Christian?" That brought him to read the Bible with great interest. Gradually it led to his personal conversion in 1859, and just as gradually came his



John Gottlieb Matteson.

Photo courtesy of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Archives.

insight into the biblical teaching of baptism.<sup>2</sup>

Having made his commitment to Christianity, Matteson began to work with great enthusiasm and success as a lay preacher for the conversion of his neighbors. As he also was very musical, his singing attracted people to his meetings. In 1860 he entered Douglas Baptist Theological College in Chicago. He had arrived in faith and totally penniless. Dressed as he was the other students thought he was the carpenter who worked at the college. Following two years of study, he was ordained as a Baptist minister in 1862.<sup>3</sup> He worked himself to the brink of burnout, but during this time he married Anna Sivertsen from Tromsø, Norway. Leaving his studies he and his wife left for Bloomsfield, Wisconsin to preach the Baptist faith. This experience as a preacher among the Scandinavians of the American frontier would serve him exceedingly well when he returned to Scandinavia in 1877.<sup>4</sup>

In the spring of 1863, he met P.H. Cady, a neighbor in Poy Sippi, Wisconsin. From him Matteson learned about the seventh-day Sabbath, which he accepted after meticulous Bible study. At the request of his Baptist congregation he gave a six months' series explaining his newfound faith in Seventh-day Adventism. The entire congregation, apart from one family, followed him. His wife had a hard time before she too was convinced, as it was also a matter of bread on the table.<sup>5</sup>

Matteson became a powerful preacher of the Advent message with a special emphasis on the love of God. He conducted revivals and established churches among the Scandinavians in Wisconsin, Michigan, Minnesota, Illinois, Iowa, and Kansas.<sup>6</sup> Scandinavians were a numerous immigrant group on the northwestern frontier. A Danish Adventist church was founded by Matteson in Poy Sippi. He was elected elder and granted a license from the church to preach. In Chicago the first Adventist church building – for a Norwegian speaking congregation – was built due to the success of Matteson's revival meetings.<sup>7</sup>

It took Matteson four years of hard service, with almost no pay, before he was ordained as an Adventist minister. During that time, he had to find an income for himself. His family suffered greatly from deprivation and poverty, but Matteson did not give up.<sup>8</sup>

Matteson was a ready writer. He prepared tracts and pamphlets and edited a songbook in Danish-Norwegian. His first tract in Danish was *The New Testament Sabbath*. In 1872 the *Advent Tidende* (Advent Herald), a Danish-Norwegian 24-page monthly periodical was launched despite resistance from the publishers in Battle Creek to a publication in a foreign language. It was the first Adventist publication in any language other than English.<sup>9</sup> Some of these magazines were sent back to the old country in Scandinavia. Before his departure from America in the spring of 1877, Matteson wrote to James White to tell him that 260 *Advent Tidende* were regularly being sent to Denmark and about 60 to Norway.<sup>10</sup> Urgent appeals had come asking for a worker, but Matteson was reluctant to go.<sup>11</sup> He said, "It is a great sacrifice on my part to go, and there is no undertaking that I have been so slow to decide on as this." Yet he feared that the cause would suffer if he didn't go and trusted that God would direct and bless the work.<sup>12</sup>

Matteson and his wife Anna departed in May 1877 from New York to Hamburg. Their children were placed in the care of good friends in Battle Creek until their parents could find a home for them. The two oldest daughters contracted malaria, Mathilde died at age 15, the younger one, Tina, survived weakened, though she later died in Kristiania (Oslo) at age 18. The other children were united with their parents in Norway a year later.<sup>13</sup>

The Mattesons sold their belongings for half their worth in order to establish the mission in Scandinavia. Their first stop was Vejle in Jutland, Denmark, where Matteson had a small hymnal printed after they had been there just two weeks. He wrote the lyrics and composed many melodies himself. He also preached in the Methodist chapel. The Vejle area was one of revival and a spiritual flourishing for many different denominations. The Quakers had their first meeting house here. Yet, Danes generally were quite skeptical of this new Adventist religion and Matteson had considerable difficulties. On invitation Matteson went to Alstrup, the northern part of Jutland. He writes about this in his autobiography: "In Alstrup and the villages around, there arose a good interest. Before, people had been very little interested in religion but now the farmers came in the evening from the fields to his meetings. During the week in homes, at the weekends in barns as they still were empty. Hardly anybody went to the public worship in the churches but between one and two hundred came to these barn meetings."

At the first baptism a mob gathered, threatening and asking that Matteson be delivered to them. But he had hidden in a small room and was not discovered. Here the first Adventist church was organized in May 1878. His short visit not only established small churches of Adventists, he also preached temperance with great success. Alcohol had been a scourge in this part of the country and that changed with Matteson's fiery temperance speeches, organizing a temperance society in 1877, the first in Denmark. He was to be remembered as a glowing and colorful Danish-American preacher.<sup>14</sup> Despite strong resistance he succeeded in founding the first small churches of Adventist believers. Matteson wanted a stable organization to support evangelistic approaches. As a result, a Danish conference was established on May 30, 1880. This was the first conference outside the United States.<sup>15</sup>

In September 1878 the General Conference sent two brothers, Andrew and Knud Brorsen to assist Matteson, immigrants from Denmark. Knud Brorsen had attended Battle Creek College and was to be a powerful figure in the growing Danish Adventist Church, as Matteson proceeded in the same year to Norway.<sup>16</sup> Another successful evangelist working in Jutland between 1880 and 1890 was Sine Renlev. She had been deeply touched by Matteson's Bible teaching on the Sabbath and Christ's soon coming. Many attended her Bible meetings which always began with singing to her guitar. There was great coverage from the press and people came in large numbers. It was a true revival and as a result a church was organized.<sup>17</sup> Matteson had, for his time, the unique view that both men and women could canvas and preach and spread the gospel, something he encouraged in the Bible schools he held in all three Scandinavian countries.<sup>18</sup>

In 1878 Matteson proceeded to Norway where readers of the *Advent Tidende* waited eagerly for an Adventist preacher. In Kristiania (Oslo) he started a series of lectures that caused a stir in the city. "When it comes to church matters, there has lately been much commotion, it has been brewing strongly among the population in Kristiania more so than in several years." The journalist in *Budbäraren* (Messenger) goes on to tell that, "John G. Matteson represents a small Baptist denomination called Seventh-day Adventists. As he is in more than a very gifted speaker and an able singer, it was not difficult for him to gather many listeners. This is especially so as he very wisely keeps to himself his diverging views until he has won the confidence of his listeners and caught the less stable in his net." Matteson held regular meetings every Sunday evening for a couple of months during which 1000-1200 listeners came.<sup>19</sup> Despite resistance, Matteson showed respect for other Christians and did not preach against them, but showed the Adventist faith as a successor of the Protestant Reformation.

On January 11, 1879 a small band of 34 made known to the public that they had signed a charter for a Christian church, the "First Seventh Day Adventist Church in Kristiania." In this charter Matteson showed his great wisdom when listing the points of belief. He used the form familiar in the Lutheran creed and from those held in common with other Protestants, to the specific Adventist articles of belief.<sup>20</sup>

In 1880 he issued a new publication, *Sundhedsbladet*, a health journal, the first of its kind in the country, which still continues (2019) in Norway. Hardened resistance from the state church necessitated that Matteson acquires a property. In May 1885 a spacious church was built at Akersgatan 74, with treatment rooms on the basement level, health being a priority on Matteson's agenda; the printing press was also housed there.

The new church building was considered a novelty in Norwegian architecture. The architect, Henrik Thrapp-Mayer, was educated at Hannover Technical college (Germany) and in Zürich. He had built the Lutheran cathedral of Kristiansand, and several other churches, as well as prestigious buildings in the capital.<sup>21</sup> Matteson's dealing with the building project, which was undertaken without total clearance from Battle Creek, caused misunderstanding and misgivings. The number of members were read as 134, while they were 34. The promised subsidy from the G.C. was also hard to acquire. The church building, Betel, was spacious and is still in use. Matteson defended his independent action by pointing out that he believed in rapid growth, as the numbers attending his meetings continued to be high. He also mentioned the delay caused by long mail connections between Norway and Battle Creek, the duration of which was almost half a year to receive a response on urgent questions. Therefore, he acted from necessity.<sup>22</sup>

However, this situation caused mistrust in Battle Creek and with the Whites. Matteson was asked to come to Battle Creek for consultations. Criticism from the Whites did not stop here. Ellen White was not merciful when accusing him and others, of displaying a great lack of wise generalship. "You yourself have not developed talent and trained helpers to take hold with you and assist in the work, as you might have done."<sup>23</sup> When Ellen White visited Scandinavia during her European stay in 1886-1888, she acquired a greater understanding of the difficulties present in the Old World, but also of the widespread poverty of members and people in general. This

broadened outlook of hers benefitted the Scandinavian field.

Matteson moved on to Stockholm, Sweden in 1884 and brought his family there in 1886. Some Swedes had listened to him in Kristiania (Oslo) in the late 1870's where many of them worked. Magazines and tracts, as well as books in Swedish from the Swedish American members had reached the old country. Matteson officiated at the organizing of the first Seventh-day Adventist Church in Sweden on August 28, 1880 in Grythytted (half-way between Oslo and Stockholm). The Swedish conference was established in 1882 in Örebro on another visit of Matteson to the country.<sup>24</sup>

Two remarkable things occurred during the time in Stockholm. Matteson organized a colporteur school to train young men and women to witness, canvas, and hold meetings. More than one future leader of the budding Adventist Church had his first training there. Secondly, as Ellen White visited, tent meetings were organized in central Stockholm at Karlberg. This was a novelty in 1887 in Sweden. Ellen White remarked in her diary that she was surprised that there were as she said, "a better kind of people attending." She met with those from middle and upper classes who had been moved by the strong revival that had spread widely in Sweden from the 1840's and touched people from strands of society, from paupers to princes. A peak in these revivals occurred in the 1880's.<sup>25</sup> One of the Swedish queen's ladies in waiting became a member of the Adventist Church founded in Stockholm in 1884. Thousands attended these tent meetings, and Ellen White noticed the deep spiritual atmosphere present among all those attending.

In 1884 Matteson and Olaf Johnson held an evangelistic campaign in Stockholm. Despite the great religious revival permeating the capital, there seemed to be generally little knowledge of Scripture. The lack of material in Swedish for the colporteurs was great and Matteson tried to issue tracts and a periodical on health. Eventually his book "The Prophecies of Jesus" was printed in Swedish, first in the USA for Swedish-speaking Americans, which were then shipped to relatives in the old country as well. Immigration to the U.S.A. was a strong factor, especially in Sweden, in the opening up to the Advent message. One of Matteson's goals was to increase the number of workers, which he succeeded in doing through the mission schools held for a couple of months each year. Matteson realized that the prospect of spreading literature was greater in Sweden than in Denmark and Norway, so he arranged a branch of the Scandinavian publishing house in Kristiania to be set up in Stockholm. He commented that this brought life into the work, and the colporteurs had enough to do in their districts.<sup>26</sup>

When Ellen White visited Scandinavia in the years 1886-1888, she had reason to be impressed by the rapidity of the process Matteson had launched in all three countries. Despite few workers with knowledge, a conference in each country had been organized, the colporteur work flourished, magazines were issued, and people were won for the Adventist message. In Stockholm alone, the membership rose from six to 60 in one winter of Matteson's campaigns.<sup>27</sup>

The first camp meeting in Europe, in Moss, Norway in 1887 was his initiative. The presence of Ellen and W. C. White, S. Haskell, B.L. Whitney, J. H. Waggoner, Robinson, and Boyd made this the first important Adventist

meeting in Scandinavia.<sup>28</sup>

Matteson's health was not the best, and in the spring of 1888 he and his family returned to the USA where he held Bible schools in Chicago, was a traveling secretary, did extensive editorial work, and ended up the last three years of his life as a Bible teacher at Union College, Nebraska, where the Scandinavian American Adventists attended school. Some of Matteson's students became future leaders in the church on both sides of the Atlantic, but some also left for foreign mission fields.<sup>29</sup>

Matteson's legacy is vast. Organizing the work in three Scandinavian countries, as well as planting numerous Scandinavian churches in the American Midwest from scratch, spreading the gospel of the love of Jesus through his writing and publishing, as well as teaching and public campaigns. Besides his widespread organizing of the Scandinavian Adventist churches, his legacy was also theological. The deeply evangelical, Christocentric focus of his preaching, coupled with a genuine interest in the saving of souls for Jesus, influenced the approach of Adventism in Scandinavia, not the least in Sweden. This focus would remain for most of the hundred plus years ahead.

Norwegian born O. A. Olsen, president of the General Conference (1888-1897), wrote in the introduction to Matteson's autobiography, which was found 12 years after his death, "He was pleasant to associate with, interesting in conversation with a good store of practical illustrations. As a public speaker I consider him a role model. His sermons were appealing and logic, convincing, carried by a tenderness that won hearts. In debates he was quick-witted and to his opponents a terror."<sup>30</sup>

Matteson died on March 30, 1896 in Santa Monica while visiting one of his sons in an attempt to recover from the feeble health he had suffered for some time.<sup>31</sup>

Ellen White commented on his death, "Elder Matteson who now sleeps in Jesus, united with His Savior as His helping hand, and organized a school of young men and women. And under his direction the students worked nobly. What a work has been done! What a multitude of books were sold. And how many there were who united with the church."<sup>32</sup>

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## NOTES

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