

Smith, Thelma A.

(1904–2002)

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Thelma Smith was an American missionary in the United States, China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan from 1927 until 1984. Smith's husband Herbert was murdered by bandits in China weeks after arriving at their first mission posting as young newlyweds and young parents. Mrs. Smith remained in Asia as a missionary for most of the next forty-seven years.



Thelma Smith, c. 1998

From *Adventism in China Digital Image Repository*. Accessed September 28, 2020. www.adventistminchina.org.

Early Life, Education, and Marriage

Thelma Annetta Chew was born on December 21, 1904, in Glenwood, Indiana. Glenwood is a rural farm town about sixty miles east of Indianapolis; more than a century later Glenwood was still a small Midwestern town, with a population of less than 250 at the time of writing.¹ Little is known of Thelma's life before her teen years, but by the late 1910s the Chew family had moved to within a few miles of Richmond, Indiana, where Thelma's father worked as a stock clerk for a tool works manufactory.² Thelma attended Richmond High School in the 1919--1920 school year and was baptized in 1919 at the age of fifteen—a conversion she attributed both to her grandmother and to her upbringing in an Adventist home.³ In 1920, as a tenth grade student, Thelma transferred to Indiana Academy, and it was here that the course of her life changed forever; Thelma Annetta Chew met Herbert Kenneth Smith at Indiana Academy, and they graduated in the same class in 1923.⁴ Just a month later Thelma and Herbert were married.

Herbert planned to attend Emmanuel Missionary College after high school, but Thelma could not afford to attend college. According to Thelma, Herbert negotiated with her father, who promised that if Thelma's parents would "permit us to marry [Herbert] would pay my way to study at [Emmanuel Missionary College]. My father and mother agreed."⁵ So on June 2, 1923, just weeks after graduating from high school, newly married Herbert and Thelma moved to Berrien Springs, Michigan, and began their lives together.⁶

Ministry

In 1927, after four years at Emmanuel Missionary College, the Smiths graduated together and immediately began preparing for the mission field. Herbert had earned a Bachelor of Theology and Thelma had completed a Bachelor of Arts in a Literary Course—a major that is heavy in rhetoric, grammar, literature, and history.⁷ Wasting no time, on August 11, 1927, they sailed for China. Thelma's father passed away just a few months before, in May, and she was leaving her mother and her fifteen-year-old sister behind.⁸

After sixteen days at sea aboard the *Empress of Asia* the Smiths arrived in Shanghai and for the next nine months Thelma and Herbert studied the language in Shanghai, waiting to head upriver to West China. Finally in May 1928 the Smiths boarded a boat that took them up the Yangtze to Chongqing.⁹ Chongqing, however, was to be only a temporary stop and where the Smiths would continue studying Chinese while waiting for Thelma's and Herbert's first child to be born. Herbert A. Smith was born in August, and shortly after his birth the Smiths traveled to a new mission field in Guiyang, in Guizhou Province, south of Chongqing. It took eighteen days by sedan chair to reach their new home, and Thelma was carried by four Chinese, two in front and two at the back. She reported that, "The scenery was beautiful. The paths were very narrow over the mountain roads. We didn't like to look down the steep path ahead. The Chinese carriers did very well, never dropped us."¹⁰

Once at their new station in Guiyang, Herbert, as superintendent of the East Kweichow Mission, almost immediately began traveling into the rural areas of his district. Only having arrived at his mission station a few weeks prior, on March 28, 1929, Herbert and two Chinese—one evangelist and one "lady instructor"—set out for Yunnan Province to the South, a journey through the rural parts of China and more than a few hundred miles away.¹¹ Two weeks later Thelma received a telegram informing her that Herbert was dead. According to the U.S. Consulate in China, Herbert died on April 8, 1929, just over a week after he left home in Guiyang.¹² "What a shock!" Thelma later wrote, explaining that

The telegram had taken three days to reach us. After that, I pleaded with God for strength and comfort. Then a letter arrived from the Chinese evangelist. It was true. He had been shot by a Chinese bandit. Some said the bandit had been a soldier who deserted the army. The sad part, he didn't die right away but suffered and bled to death. There was nothing to relieve his suffering. It took 11 days to bring his body back. I never saw him. I wanted to remember him as he was when I said goodbye to him. He was buried there in Kweiyang, Kweichow [Guiyang, Guizhou Province]. I know angels watch his grave.¹³

Less than two years after arriving in China Herbert was dead, and after about six years of marriage Thelma was a widow. The China Division of Seventh-day Adventists requested that Thelma Smith and her young son Herbert return to Shanghai, but Thelma elected to remain in Guiyang. Except for a furlough in 1933, Mrs. Smith and son Herbert remained in the mission field until 1941.

Having been posted to a new mission station—this time in Henan Province, further east than Guiyang—Smith and the other missionaries at the mission compound in Henan were closer to the Japanese front lines. In January of 1941 one of the missionaries at Thelma’s compound reported that the Japanese had conducted an ariel raid on the mission and that a bomb had detonated twenty feet from Mrs. Smith’s home. Smith was in her office at the church when she heard the explosion and immediately left for her house. The entire compound was damaged, and Japanese troops were only fifteen miles away—the missionaries decided to flee. Although they returned three weeks later, they soon decided to vacate the mission permanently; after attempting to join a safe mission elsewhere in China—and after weeks of traveling through China on bike, rickshaw, and rail, Smith and son Herbert finally made their way to Hong Kong, and then to North America.¹⁴

The Smiths arrived in the United States on July 8, 1941, on the *President Coolidge*, having left Hong Kong about six months after the first bombing raid in Yencheng.¹⁵ Although she was no longer in China, she appears to have been determined to continue her religious work. By early fall Smith had arrived in Vancouver, Canada, where she joined the Vancouver Missionary Society as a Bible worker, and from 1941 until she returned to China in 1948, Smith continued as a Bible worker in Vancouver, then at the Stevens Avenue Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and finally in Detroit, Michigan, where she assisted with a revival and evangelistic series and taught Bible doctrine.¹⁶

After almost eight years in the United States, in October 1948, Smith boarded the *USS Granville* in Houston, Texas, and again departed for China.¹⁷ This time, for the first time, without son Herbert. Due to the civil war in China, Smith was posted to Hong Kong—seemingly waiting to return to the mainland. She was likely in Clearwater Bay at the Adventist college in the New Territories. But by mid-autumn in 1949 it was clear the Communists were going to win the war and her return to China would be unlikely. As other missionaries evacuated China, many made their way to Taiwan, and by the end of 1949 Thelma had joined them there.¹⁸

Taiwan was Thelma’s final mission posting. Arriving in Taiwan in 1949, in Tainan, Mrs. Smith helped with evangelistic efforts and church building until 1952, when she was reposted to Taipei. For six years in Taipei she helped with evangelism efforts, and when the Taiwan Sanitarium and Hospital opened in 1955, she began working there as a Bible instructor.¹⁹ For the next eleven years Smith seems to have worked from Taipei, making trips into the rural mountain villages outside the city, engaging in evangelism and teaching the Bible. During this period she also was twice posted to Hong Kong for temporary duty.²⁰

In 1966, after a regular furlough, Thelma Smith began her final mission posting at Taiwan Missionary College, where she was a religion professor. Even after she retired from Taiwan Adventist College in 1974, she continued to teach, either as a part-time instructor or as a volunteer, finally returning to the United States in 1984.²¹ She retired at the age of eighty, having spent forty-seven years as a missionary, forty of which were in Chinese-speaking Asia.

Later Life

Thelma's son Herbert died in 1974, around the same time she officially retired from teaching at Taiwan Adventist College. When she returned from Taiwan in 1984 she settled first in Angwin, California, and then moved to Oregon. Smith passed away on December 29, 2002, and is buried in Deer Creek Cemetery, in Selma, a small town in southeastern Oregon.

Summary of Service

Location	Position	Dates
Kweichow (Guizhou)	West China Union, religion instructor and mission treasurer	1927-1929
Chunking (Chongqing)	religion instructor and mission treasurer	1929-1931
Hankow (Hangzhou)	Central China Union, treasurer and teacher	1932-1937
Hong Kong	Unknown (fled from China after Japanese invasion of East China in 1937, fled from Hong Kong after Japanese invasion in 1941)	1937-1941
Vancouver, Canada	Bible instructor	1941-1943
Minneapolis, Minnesota	Bible instructor	1943-1947
Detroit, Michigan	Michigan Conference, Bible instructor	1947-1948
Hong Kong	Bible instructor	1948-1949
Tainan, Taiwan	Bible worker	1949-1952
Taiwan, Taiwan and Hong Kong	Bible worker and evangelist/teacher, Taiwan Sanitarium and Hospital	1952-1966
Nantou, Taiwan	Religion professor, Taiwan Adventist College	1966-1984

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NOTES

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