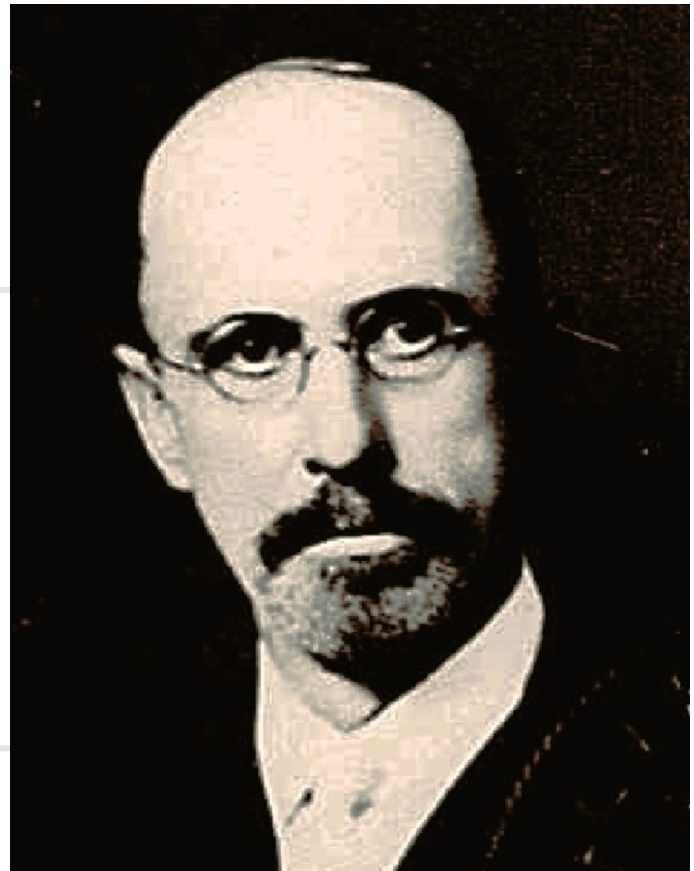


Parmele, Rufus Wells (1869–1945)

MILTON HOOK

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Rufus W. Parmele was a minister, president of three conferences in the American South, and pioneering mission administrator in the territory that became the Inter-American Division.



Rufus W. Parmele

Credit: United State Passport, 1917.

Early Years

Rufus Parmele was born at Mackinaw, central Illinois, on October 3, 1869, to farmer Lucius Parmele (1818-1902) and his wife Merab (Ball) Parmele (1827-1894). Rufus was the youngest of their eleven children, the older siblings being: Lumen (b. 1845), Mary Adelaide (b. 1848), Clara (b. 1851), George Spencer (b. 1853), Emily (b. 1855), Almira Ada (b. 1857), Gilbert Hoyt (b. 1859), Charles (b. 1862), Julia (b. 1864) and Lucius Chapin (b. 1866).¹

The Parmele family united with the Seventh-day Adventist church when Rufus was just a lad. His elementary education took place in the public school at Mackinaw. He was baptized at age 17 at Emporia, Kansas, by Elder Charles W. Flaiz.²

Immediately after his baptism Rufus entered the colporteur work in Kansas and Illinois, selling *Bible Readings for the Home Circle*, *Great Controversy* and *Patriarchs and Prophets*.³ On November 29, 1891, he married Viola Alice Kirk in Battle Creek, Michigan. She was a trained teacher but at the time was employed as a gilder in the bindery of the Review and Herald Publishing Company. William C. Gage performed their ceremony.⁴

Ministry in the Midwest

Parmele then pursued further education at Battle Creek College while canvassing during the summers. He became a stenographer at the General Conference office in Battle Creek, serving from September 1893 until March 1895 when he was appointed treasurer of both the Oklahoma Conference and the Oklahoma Tract Society.⁵ A year later, in June 1896, Parmele entered preaching ministry in the Oklahoma Conference and was ordained at the camp meeting in Guthrie on October 17, 1897, by Robert M. Kilgore, Henry Shultz, Edgar T. Russell, and other participating ministers.⁶ At that time, what was to become the state of Oklahoma in 1907 was Oklahoma and Indian Territories. Parmele was one of the main speakers at the first camp meeting held by Seventh-day Adventists in Indian Territory, a gathering at Vinita, Oklahoma, in May 1898.⁷

Parmele transferred to the Kansas Conference in March 1899 and remained in its employ until 1904. It proved to be a very eventful, sometimes sorrowful, period in his ministry. During a portion of his Kansas term, he doubled as secretary for the Southwestern Union Conference for the first year of its existence, April 1901 through April 1902. For a few months, April through July 1901, Parmele was concurrently loaned to the Arkansas Conference to preach in Little Rock.⁸ During these years of multiple assignments and widespread travel, his wife, Viola, suffered from valvular heart disease, a lingering consequence of typhoid fever contracted in 1898. She passed away at age 44 on December 11, 1901, and was laid to rest in Topeka Cemetery, Kansas.⁹

During the summer of 1902 Rufus also contracted typhoid fever and could not work during the fall and early winter.¹⁰ He recovered sufficiently to marry Dr. Lydia Estelle Kynett (1865-1925) on December 23, 1902, in Mellen, Wisconsin.¹¹ A Bible worker and medical missionary nurse during the 1890s, Lydia completed a medical degree in 1900 at American Medical Missionary College in Battle Creek.

The couple began joint ministry in mid-January 1903, itinerating through eastern Kansas for the next several months, he conducting evangelistic meetings and she lecturing on the principles of healthful living. They labored in Altoona, Topeka, Ozawkie, Pittsburg, Hutchinson, Halstead, Newton, Elk City and Humboldt. Elder Parmele held several baptisms during this itinerary. Near the end of April, they began longer-term ministry in Fort Scott. Dr. Kynett established a practice there, and her husband observed that this enabled them to gain an influence that often was not possible during shorter evangelistic efforts by tent companies.¹²

In September 1904, both Rufus and Lydia Parmele were appointed to the faculty of Union College in Nebraska. He taught bookkeeping, typewriting and phonography in the Commercial Department. She taught biological sciences and hydrotherapy while also serving as college physician.¹³

Administration in the South

After two years at Union they moved to Nashville, Tennessee, in 1906, where Rufus became circulation manager for the Southern Publishing Association and Lydia joined the medical staff of Nashville Sanitarium.¹⁴ Elder Parmele visited churches, camp meetings, and schools, to promote SPA books and periodicals and to recruit canvassers. In the summer of 1907, for example, he conducted classes in canvassing and homeland missionary

work at a Teachers' Institute at Oakwood Manual Training School in Huntsville Alabama.¹⁵

In the Fall of 1907, Parmele was elected president of the Florida Conference. At the time there was a constituency of 400 members among 18 churches. The office was located at Bartow but moved to Orlando during his administration.¹⁶ A report he gave of a summer tour through the conference in 1908 provides a window on his work as conference president. In Lakeland for the first weekend of July, he preached at the Adventist church on Sabbath and then twice at a Presbyterian church on Sunday. He visited Bartow the following weekend, then he spent eight days in Orlando dealing with the start-up of Florida Sanitarium.¹⁷ A 21-room facility was acquired for the sanitarium (precursor to Florida Hospital, more recently AdventHealth Orlando), which began operation October 15, 1908. Elder Parmele was president of the board of trustees, even though initially it was owned by the Florida Sanitarium and Benevolent Association independently of the conference. Dr. Lydia Parmele was one of the two physicians.¹⁸

After a few days at Palatka making arrangements for camp meeting, Elder Parmele went to Windsor where he organized a company of Black Americans into a church under the leadership of John Manns, the conference's lead minister for the Black work. Parmele then traveled to Gainesville and Brooker to dedicate their church buildings. He proceeded to Jennings Lake church and then to Morriston to lead out in organizing another Black church. The month of August concluded with a weekend visit to Plant City where Elder Parmele preached to the "white brethren" three times and Dr. Parmele lectured on health. The visit to Plant City was also for the purpose of organizing a third Black church in two months. The congregation of 16 members assembled at an Adventist school for Black children conducted by Ella Sanks.¹⁹

At the conclusion of five years in Florida, Parmele could report that membership had nearly doubled, though he acknowledged that migration into the state was a significant factor. In October 1912, he accepted the presidency of the Louisiana Conference.²⁰ In New Orleans, locale of the conference office, Dr. Parmele set up a small practice and served as conference medical secretary as she had during their time in the Florida Conference.²¹ Just over three years later, Elder Parmele transferred to the presidency of the Cumberland Conference, taking up his duties in January 1916. The conference territory spanned eastern Tennessee and northwestern Georgia with headquarters in Knoxville, Tennessee.²²

North Latin American Mission Development

Less than a year into his administration of the Cumberland Conference, the General Conference appointed Parmele to organize a new structure called the Northern Latin American Missions. Its purpose was to oversee missions that had been organized during the early years of Adventist work in Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, British Honduras (now Belize), Cuba, Haiti and Puerto Rico.²³ On February 11, 1917, Rufus and Lydia departed from Tampa, Florida, aboard the "Olivet" to begin a new phase of ministry, based in Havana, Cuba.²⁴

It was the beginning of a period of administrative flux leading up to organization of the Inter-American Division in 1922.²⁵ At the 1918 General Conference session in San Francisco, the Northern Latin American Missions, with a territory enlarged to include the remainder of Central America (Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, and the Canal Zone), Colombia, Venezuela, Guadeloupe and Martinique, was organized as the North Latin American Union Conference. Parmele was elected president and moved once again to New Orleans, made the temporary headquarters due in part to war-time conditions.²⁶ This arrangement proved to be unmanageable and the territory was sub-divided within a year. Parmele became superintendent of a new entity named the Central American Missions in 1919, comprising British Honduras, Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador and western Nicaragua.²⁷ Mexico was added in 1920, and the administrative unit renamed Mexico and Central American Missions. Parmele established an office in Tacubaya, a southwestern suburb of Mexico City, and his wife joined him there to once again engage in medical missionary work.²⁸ Much of Elder Parmele's time was spent at annual constituency meetings throughout the field, receiving reports and making plans for further progress. Fluency in the Spanish language facilitated his work.²⁹

Later Years

While in Mexico City Lydia contracted an ailment that required a return to the United States in 1922, marking an end to the Parmeles mission service in Latin America.³⁰ Rufus ministered in the Southern California Conference, first at Glendale church, then the White Memorial Church in Los Angeles for six years, and finally in the Pomona Valley district until retirement in 1934. He occasionally assisted with chaplaincy work at Glendale Sanitarium after his retirement.³¹

Dr. Parmele was on staff at Glendale Sanitarium for several years after their return to America in 1922.³² She suffered with heart disease and passed away on January 7, 1935.³³ She was laid to rest in the Grand View Memorial Park at Glendale, California.³⁴

On February 9, 1936, Rufus married Mrs. Carolyn Dona Burnett (1875-1963), a Bible worker in the Southern California Conference. Elder Wilbur Sweany conducted their ceremony.³⁵ They remained in Glendale and attended the Glendale church, Elder Parmele sometimes taking a leading part.³⁶ On January 11, 1945, he fell while stepping from his kitchen to his porch and broke his right femur. He passed away in the Glendale Sanitarium two days later with heart disease and complications from the accident and was buried in the Grand View Memorial Park cemetery.³⁷

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