

Hanson, Herbert Martin (1894–1966)

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Herbert M. Hanson was a missionary educator whose decades of service in Ethiopia helped set the tone in Adventist education and humanitarian work in the Horn of Africa.

Early Years

Herbert Martin Hanson was born on March 10, 1894, in Artichoke Township, Big Stone County, Minnesota, to Norwegian immigrant parents.¹ He was the seventh of the eleven children of Edward Hanson (1856-1947) and Caroline D. Peterson (1860-1945). His parents had left Norway at a young age, seeking a new life on the prairies of western Minnesota, where they established a farm.²

Growing up in this rural environment, Herbert completed eight grades in a local public school. He then left home to attend Maplewood Academy, located 200 miles away in Maple Plain, Minnesota. After completing 12th grade in 1916, he went to the Danish-Norwegian Seminary (later renamed the Hutchinson Theological Seminary) in Hutchinson Minnesota, where he earned his B.A. degree in 1921. Soon after he graduated, Herbert took on part-time teaching at the seminary while also spending one summer studying at the University of Chicago in Illinois.³

In June 1921, Herbert married [Della Frances Thompson](#) who became his lifelong companion in mission. Della was born on October 9, 1897 in Minneapolis, Minnesota, the daughter of Thomas Nielson Thompson (1862-1920) and Elizabeth Alice née Rosser (1870-1959).⁴ Like Herbert, she attended Maplewood Academy completing



Herbert M. Hanson

From *Northern Union Outlook*, February 17, 1967.

her 12th grade there before joining the Danish-Norwegian Seminary⁵ to study music.

Norway

Shortly after their marriage, the Hansons began overseas missionary service in Norway, where they helped establish the first Seventh-day Adventist academy in the country, located at Onsrud, Jessheim. The school was known as the Norway SDA Mission School or *Onsrud Misjouskole* in the Norwegian language. Herbert Hanson served as the principal, and also the farm superintendent. He also taught physics, mathematics and English. Della Hanson taught music.⁶

Before 1921, Norway shared a mission school with Denmark and Sweden, but it became apparent that having a school in another country was not effective. The new Norwegian school began on rented property in 1921, but after the first year, the Norway Conference purchased land 35 miles northeast of Oslo, where a brick building was adapted for educational use. The new term opened in October 1922, with Hanson in charge. The acquisition included 100 acres of land on which Hanson oversaw development of a successful dairy and poultry farm. He emphasized industrial work alongside the normal academic program. Despite facing debt and resource limitations, Hanson placed the school on a firm spiritual and financial footing during 11 years as principal. From 1925 to 1932, 65 students were baptized.⁷

In September 1933, the West Nordic Union called O. J. Olsen from his missionary service in Iceland, to serve as the principal, replacing Hanson.⁸ Hanson continued his duties as a teacher and farm manager.

Ethiopia

In 1934, Herbert and Della Hanson accepted a call to Ethiopia. At that time, the Adventist work in Ethiopia centered around seven mission stations offering education, medical care, and spiritual guidance to the people. Three hospitals had been established: the Taffari Makonnen Hospital in Dessie, the Haile Selassie I Hospital in Debre Tabor, and the Empress Zauditu Memorial Hospital in the capital city, Addis Ababa.⁹ Herbert became principal of a new mission school at Addis Alem. However, due to an impending military invasion by Italy, the school closed in 1935 after just one year. The Hansons chose to remain in Ethiopia, relocating to the Zauditu Memorial Hospital in Addis Ababa, where they contributed to the efforts of the Ethiopian Red Cross.¹⁰

Several months after the Italian forces gained control of Addis Ababa, the authorities allowed Hanson to reopen the school at Addis Alem. They also required him to teach Italian, and he did so, staying one step ahead of his class.¹¹ In 1939, though, the Italian government forced Hanson to hand over the school, and the Hansons returned to the United States where they spent a year on furlough. Despite the uncertain future of mission work in Ethiopia, they felt called by God to return to the war-torn country. After enduring a period of waiting in Ethiopian huts outside Addis Ababa, they resumed their educational mission following the return of Emperor

Haile Selassie to the country in 1941. Herbert opened a school in Addis Ababa, improvising with scarce resources to continue educating Ethiopian students.¹²

In 1943, Emperor Haile Selassie gifted Herbert a site for a new school in Akaki, where Herbert would serve as principal, teacher, and builder.¹³ In addition to his work at the school, he took on the position of Education secretary for the Ethiopian Mission in 1944, and carried that responsibility for a decade.¹⁴

Legacy

Herbert Hanson's tireless work continued in Ethiopia until July 1966 when his health began to fail. Word went round that he was ill and he found comfort in the appreciation and friendship of former students and teachers at his school who visited him constantly at the Empress Zauditu Memorial Hospital. After spending nearly four months in the hospital, Herbert Hanson passed away on October 27, 1966, at the age of 72. He had been in missionary service in Ethiopia for 32 years.

At his funeral, held on October 28, members of the royal family, along with several ministers of state and many former students of the Akaki school, paid their respects. His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I provided the royal hearse for the mile-long procession to the Paulos Petros Cemetery in Addis Ababa, where Herbert was laid to rest alongside fellow missionaries.¹⁵

The schools established and administered by Herbert Hanson were centers of excellence and many of his former students went on to become cabinet ministers, ambassadors, and leaders around the world.¹⁶ He was survived by his wife, Della Hanson, who had served in the royal palace for 17 years by the time of his death. She continued her work at the palace, carrying forward the mission that she and Herbert shared. She remained in Ethiopia until the ouster of Emperor Haile Selassie in 1975. She passed away in 1981 (see the article "Hanson, Della Frances Thompson" in Related Content).¹⁷

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NOTES

1. "Herbert Martin Hanson," *FamilySearch*, accessed August 18, 2024, <https://www.familysearch.org/tree/person/details/GWJT-9QW>.
2. C. D. Watson, "A Hero Goes To His Rest," *Northern Light*, December 1966, 11.
3. Ibid.
4. "Della Frances Thompson," *FamilySearch*, accessed August 16, 2024, <https://www.familysearch.org/tree/person/details/G794-49L>.
5. The Danish-Norwegian Seminary was operated in Hutchinson, Minnesota, from 1911 to 1928. It was established to train church workers in Danish and Norwegian languages. Initially, the plan was to provide this training at Union College, Nebraska, but by 1909, Union College, had become so overcrowded that it was decided to create separate schools. L. H. Christian located the buildings of a defunct Danish Lutheran institution in Hutchinson, which were owned by the city. The institution was renamed as Hutchinson Theological Seminary.
6. "Norway SDA Mission School" in *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* for 1926, 284.
7. Herbert Hanson, "Onsrud Missjonskole," *Advent Survey*, September 1932, 6.
8. "From In, About and Roundabout." *Advent Survey*, September 1933, 8.
9. "Ethiopian Union Mission" in *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* for 1935, 153-154.
10. E. D. Dick, "In Ethiopia" *Advent Survey*, January 1936, 2.
11. Watson, "A Hero Goes To His Rest," 11.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. "Ethiopian Mission" in *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* for 1944, 209; "Ethiopian Union Mission," in *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* for 1954, 153.

15. Watson, "A Hero Goes To His Rest," 11.

16. Ibid., 12.

17. "Della F. Hanson obituary," *ARH*, February 4, 1982, 15.

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