

Russell, Riley (1875–1961) and Ella Margaret (Camp) (1876–1940)



Riley Russell, M.D.

Photo courtesy of Kuk Heon Lee.

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Riley Russell (, Rho Seol) was the first medical missionary to enter Korea as a medical doctor. He devoted himself to missionary work and medical service in Korea for 15 years as the director of Soonan Dispensary-Hospital, the head of the Workers' Training School (Soonan Uimyeong hakkyo), and the director of the West Chosen Mission.

Background

Riley Russell was born on July 21, 1875, in Strasburg, Illinois.¹ After graduating from the Department of Nursing at Battle Creek College in the United States, he studied medicine again at the School of Medicine of George Washington University. By the time he graduated from the School of Medicine and completed his medical intern's course, he volunteered for overseas medical missions with the desire to work in missionary sites such as the Islamic Country. When he was in Battle Creek, he also served as the leader at the Sabbath School of Battle Creek Tabernacle Church.²

By the time he finished his internship, there was a tragedy in Korea where Willena, the daughter of William Smith, the first missionary, died of malaria even before she was two years old. Pastor Smith mourned the death of his daughter, recognizing the need for a medical missionary in Korea, and asked the General Conference (GC)

to send a doctor. Upon receiving Smith's request, the Department of Overseas Mission at the GC advertised that it was looking for a medical missionary to volunteer for Korean missionary work.³ It was at that time that Riley Russell volunteered for overseas missions. The Department of Overseas Mission at the GC asked Russell to choose between Kashmir in India and Korea in the Far Eastern region. Accordingly, Riley Russell chose Korea, which is less known than Kashmir, and became the first medical missionary to serve in Korea.

After volunteering as a Korean missionary, Riley Russell married Ella Margaret Camp on July 22, 1908. She was born on October 22, 1876, near Marshfield, Oregon. After becoming an Adventist, she taught students at a certain school for a year. And she entered training as a nurse in the St. Helena Sanitarium. She then enrolled in the American Medical Missionary College in Battle Creek, where she spent two years. In 1908 she was united in marriage with Dr. Riley Russell.⁴ And the new couple headed to Korea by ferry from Seattle Port on August 1, 1908. Riley Russell and his wife entered Korea on September 24, 1908, with Helen May Scott, who volunteered as an educational missionary.⁵

Ministry in Korea

Upon arriving in Soonan, where the Korean mission headquarters was located, Riley Russell treated eight patients waiting for doctors at Pastor Smith's house. After that he treated patients at the house for about a month and visited nearby areas to treat patients. He treated about five hundred patients in that way during September 1908.⁶ However, it was not easy to treat patients without a dispensary. Therefore, he used a classroom at the worker's training school, which William Smith built a year ago, as a dispensary. However, the clinic was too small to take care of many patients; so, they had to set up a new dispensary building.

In September 1909 the headquarters of the Korean Mission was moved from Soonan to Seoul. At that time Mimi Scharffenberg, who became the editor of the monthly magazine, moved to Seoul as well, and Riley Russell purchased the house where she lived and used it as a dispensary.⁷ Russell treated 20,000 patients for four years at the small dispensary, and the *Washington Post* reported the news under the title "20,000 patients in a \$20 building."⁸ During this period a total of three people worked with Russell at the Soonan dispensary, including one nurse and two employees.⁹

As a medical missionary, Riley Russell served as secretary of the medical department when the Korean Mission was organized in November 1908.¹⁰ And because William Smith had to leave for the United States in early 1909 to attend the GC Session, he was also appointed the principal of the Korean Workers' Training School.¹¹ After moving the mission headquarters to Seoul in September 1909, Korean Mission leaders held the Workers' Institute in February 1910. At this meeting the Korean Mission divided the entire country into four mission fields, and Riley Russell was appointed as the director of the West Mission Field.¹² Therefore, while working as a medical missionary at the Soonan dispensary, Riley Russell became one of the leading roles in the Korean Mission, including the secretary of the medical missionary department, the head of the Workers' Training

School, and the director of the West Mission Field. Among these positions, the head of the school for training workers was taken charge of by Howard M. Lee since 1911.¹³

As a doctor, Russell not only treats patients at the Soonan dispensary but also visits churches in the West Mission Field as a missionary director. For this reason the work of the hospital was often performed by Mrs. Russell and Korean assistants. At that time assistants who worked with Riley Russell and Mrs. Russell were Bong-ho Kang, Chang-se Kim, and Seok-gwan Lee, and Seong-il Lee, who supported Mrs. Russell's work.¹⁴ Russell was ordained as a pastor at the first General Meeting of the Korean Mission held on August 13, 1910, because he was responsible for the missionary work in the West Mission Field.¹⁵

Riley and Ella Russell carried out missionary activities in Korea. Riley Russell led the Eucharist at Pyeongdong Church in Seoul on January 6, 1912, and preached at the church on the Sabbath of January 13. On Sunday, January 14, Ella Russell gave a lecture on health treatments.¹⁶ This church moved its chapel to a larger place in 1911 due to an increase in believers. In March 1912 Riley and Ella Russell were engaged in an evangelical meeting in Kyungsan, the center of the South mission field, to provide health lectures and patient-treatment services.¹⁷ While Riley Russell was striving for medical missionary work and evangelism, a tragedy occurred in 1915 when his first son, Bennet, died of dysentery. The Russells made more efforts to develop Soonan dispensary to overcome the sadness of losing their son.¹⁸

In 1913 the General Conference provided \$2,000 for the construction of the Soonan Dispensary-Hospital. Riley Russell built a new hospital building with this fund. However, this building was not large enough to be accredited as a hospital by the Korean government. Dr. Russell appealed to the GC for the need to build a new building suitable for the level of accreditation. Accordingly, the GC provided an additional \$7,000 to expand the Soonan Dispensary-Hospital. With the funds Riley Russell expanded the existing building to build a two-story brick building and was accredited as Soonan Dispensary-Hospital.¹⁹

In 1917 Dr. Russell briefly returned to the United States for a sabbatical year. During that time Soonan hospital was in charge of medical treatments by Dr. Byung-chan Kang, Dr. Chang-se Kim, and two nurses.²⁰ On March 1, 1919, the independence movement took place in Korea. This movement spread across the country, and on March 7, 1919, the independence movement took place in Soonan, as well. At that time several people were shot, and Dr. Russell treated them. He was arrested by police and tried in the Pyongyang High Court after suffering for three months. He protested to the presiding judge that it was natural as a doctor to reveal that he was a member of the Red Cross and treat people who were shot during the demonstration. The judge questioned Russell about what he had done in the United States. Riley Russell replied that he worked as a doctor in the United States to treat patients, and that Warren G. Harding, the U.S. President, was also one of the patients he treated. Russell submitted Harding's letter as evidence. After seeing the letter, the judge decided to dismiss all of Russell's charges.²¹

In the summer of 1920, the GC sent \$10,000, so the Soonan Dispensary-Hospital could reconstruct to a Western-style, installing heating systems and to expand the size of the hospital.²² Riley Russell, who was devoted to medical and evangelical work, was forced to return to the United States in the spring of 1922 after completing his missionary work in Korea due to the illness of his wife and son.²³ As the first medical missionary in Korea, he pioneered more than twenty-four churches and baptized 842 people during his 14 years of ministry.²⁴

Later Life

After returning to the United States, he began working as a medical doctor and as a Training School Faculty member at the Glendale Sanitarium and Hospital in California.²⁵ From 1926 he served as an Executive Committee member of the Southern California Conference.²⁶ The following year he was appointed as an honorary minister at the conference.²⁷ After retiring from ministry as a doctor and pastor, he served as a member of the board of directors at Glendale Sanitarium and Hospital in California.²⁸

In November 1940, before he was appointed a member of the board of directors, his wife, Ella, died on November 2, 1940.²⁹ In 1944 he married Theresa Carter Yale. Riley Russell died in Glendale, California, on January 27, 1961.³⁰

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