

# Dunn, Abbie Florence (1893–1983)

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Abbie Florence Dunn (Chinese name: 董 艾比, pinyin: Dèng Fúēn) was a teacher and colporteur in Oklahoma and New Mexico and a long-term missionary to China and Taiwan. Dunn remained in China during World War II, continuing her evangelistic work in “Free China.” After the war she continued as a Bible worker and educator until China expelled foreign missionaries after the Communists won the Chinese

Civil War, at which time she was transferred to Taiwan. Dunn was notable for her encouragement of, and participation in, the education and training of local Chinese women as Bible workers.

## Early Years

Dunn was born into the large and growing family of William J. Dunn (1857-1940) and Louisa née McClintick (1860-1940). Many of her siblings, including Bertha Dunn Dye, Jennie Dunn Holman, and Nora Dunn Ward, worked as denominational employees and taught in Adventist schools across the United States stretching from Texas to Washington State. Her most traveled sibling is probably Norman W. Dunn, who worked in the Central American Union and South American Division and was an associate secretary of the General Conference. Abbie Dunn graduated from the Indianola Intermediate School in Ketchum, Oklahoma, from eighth grade! As a teenager and young adult, Dunn worked as a colporteur during the summers and occasionally wrote poetry that



Abbie Dunn

From *Southwestern Union Record*, June 25, 1966, page 7. Courtesy of Adventist Digital Library.

expressed confidence in God's leading in life.<sup>2</sup> She attributed her faith and baptism at the age of seventeen to the "godly influence of my faithful mother."<sup>3</sup>

Dunn attended Southwestern Junior College for an Academic Normal Course followed by the regular junior college courses. She was a good student and received high grades in her courses.<sup>4</sup> From Southwestern, Dunn returned as a teacher to Ketchum Intermediate School and eventually taught in Adventist schools in Ardmore, Oklahoma, and Hagerman, New Mexico.<sup>5</sup>

Dunn early on felt a call to full-time Bible work. She viewed her eight years of teaching as a time of training for evangelism on a larger scale.<sup>6</sup> She strongly believed her forte was personal rather than public evangelism. She, therefore, moved from education into full-time Bible work. After three years as a Bible worker, she attended Union College in Lincoln, Nebraska, for one year, working on a Gospel Worker's Course, which was a bachelor's degree designed to train students in basic theology, personal evangelism, and colporteur work. Her progress in this degree was interrupted early in 1930 when she was asked by the General Conference to undertake personal evangelism in Central China.<sup>7</sup>

## Missionary to China

As typical with most Adventist missionaries at the time in China, Dunn spent her first two years learning Chinese at a language institute in Beijing.<sup>8</sup> Occasionally missionaries were sent back or to other fields, if they could not obtain an adequate proficiency of Chinese. Dunn successfully learned Chinese, but as she noted, she continued to study and learn Chinese long after those two years.<sup>9</sup> By 1932 Dunn, along with Bible workers Mrs. Ni and Miss Tao, were participating in evangelistic efforts in Jiujiang (formerly known as Kiukiang).<sup>10</sup> Dunn found Chinese Bible women invaluable as collaborators and promoted recognition of their contributions to evangelistic campaigns in English-language periodicals.

As a missionary, Dunn served in a variety of capacities depending on the current needs of the Chinese Mission. Based in Hankou (then called Hankow), Dunn primarily gave personal Bible studies but also, for example, taught at Wang Gia Dun School when the need arose. She had a particular burden to educate and train Chinese women as Bible workers and was also particularly concerned about the lack of education among the wives of Chinese Adventist workers. To rectify this perceived lack, she, at times, taught basic literacy courses.<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, the full names of the Chinese Bible women were not recorded, but she worked with quite a few over the years including Mrs. Lo, Miss Wang, Miss Ko Chung-liang, and Mrs. Hu.<sup>12</sup> One of her notable converts in Hankou in 1932 was David Lin's mother, Pan Cheng Kun, the wife of a government official. Dunn asked fellow missionary Lucy Andrus in Beijing to give Bible studies to David Lin, later a prominent Chinese pastor and administrator.

## World War II

The Second Sino-Japanese War unsurprisingly had an impact on missionaries. In January 1938 Dunn took an extended furlough to the United States and studied for a semester at Walla Walla College, partially due to her interest in further education and partially due to the fighting between the Chinese and Japanese.<sup>13</sup> Despite world war looming on the horizon and the occupation of parts of China by Japan, Dunn returned from her furlough to China on January 7, 1939.<sup>14</sup> Dunn's parents both died the next year in 1940 while Abbie was in China.

In April 1940 Dunn reported continued Bible studies and increased interest in Christianity among those displaced by war. Dunn obtained the Bibles that she distributed from the Hankow Scottish Bible Society.<sup>15</sup> Later in 1940 Dunn, along with other missionaries and refugees, retreated from Hankou to Shanghai where the division was headquartered, and which had been occupied by the Japanese since 1937. Eventually Dunn left Japanese occupied territory and arrived in Hong Kong. Fortunately for her, she left Shanghai just before Pearl Harbor and, therefore, never experienced internment in a Japanese concentration camp like her fellow missionaries, the Oss family. From Hong Kong with the intervention of the State Department, Dunn was able to obtain a flight to Chongqing. After the fall of Nanjing and later Wuhan to the Japanese, Chongqing became the wartime capital of "Free China," the part of China unoccupied by the Japanese and the military headquarters for Chiang Kai-Shek and the Kuomintang.<sup>16</sup> It experienced heavy bombing from the Japanese throughout World War II.

In Chongqing, based at the Adventist sanitarium there, Dunn continued to give Bible studies especially for refugees and hospital staff of both sexes. The air raids undoubtedly impacted Dunn personally, although she primarily expressed distress about the injury and death of church members and destruction of *Signs of the Times*, an Adventist Chinese periodical during the bombings.<sup>17</sup> Dunn testified to having great success with converting refugees, patients, and doctors during her time there.<sup>18</sup> Unfortunately, however, church records during the period were incomplete. Dunn, strongly believing in the need for evangelism and healthcare to work together, trained nurses at the hospital to attend to the spiritual, as well as physical, needs of their patients.<sup>19</sup>

## Post-World War II

After the war Dunn returned to the United States for furlough and some, undoubtedly, much needed rest. She was voted \$310 for rehabilitation. The amount Dunn was voted was significantly less than that of the married women and men who also received appropriations from the General Conference, but unlike some of them, Dunn did not lose a spouse or live in an internment camp.<sup>20</sup> Yet, her multiple retreats from the Japanese army meant a loss of many of her material possessions, lost wages, and the stress and strain of living in an active war zone. While waiting for an opportunity to return to China, Dunn attended the delayed 1946 General Conference Session as the sole representative from the West China Union Mission and spoke about her experience during the war.<sup>21</sup>

By 1947 Dunn was back in China and participating in evangelism in Hankou with Evangelist Wang.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, that year she participated in workers' meetings for the Hupeh (Hubei) Mission. Denominational periodicals reflect the growing concern at this point as to whether it was feasible to continue to have foreign missionaries in China, as Communists gained ascendancy in parts of the mission. And at the workers' meetings, the need for Adventist work in China to become self-supporting was discussed.<sup>23</sup> In 1948 Dunn, always busy, participated in giving Bible studies to prisoners in Wuchang Prison along with Pastor Dunn (unrelated to Abbie) and Pastor Giang and met with sufficient success to have Pastor Shen Tien-ran come and baptize their converts.<sup>24</sup> During these years, Dunn also created Bible study guides that were published by *Ministry Magazine*.<sup>25</sup>

As the Communist Civil War created increased difficulties for foreign missionaries and neither the United States government nor the Seventh-day Adventist denomination wanted a repeat of World War II, most wives and families of missionaries were relocated to areas of China considered more secure—Shanghai, Canton, and Hong Kong. Dunn was one of the last foreign missionaries to leave Hankou.<sup>26</sup> From mid-May to the beginning of June 1949, Shanghai was the center of the Chinese Civil War between the Chiang Kai-Shek's Kuomintang party and the Communists led by Mao Zedong. Many of the missionaries had been pushed by the internecine fighting to Shanghai and, thus, lived through yet another experience of war. At first the Chinese Communist Party tolerated foreign missionaries, as it consolidated control. By October of 1949, Dunn had retreated from Hankou to Shanghai and with Mary Chu held a series of evangelistic services by Ningkuo Road in Shanghai.<sup>27</sup>

Along with other foreign denominational employees in China, by the end of 1949, the denomination made moves to shift Abbie Dunn from mainland China to another part of Asia. The General Conference Committee voted to transfer Dunn to British-controlled Hong Kong, later suggesting Singapore as an alternative location for work and, finally, sending her to Taiwan (then called Formosa).<sup>28</sup> By this time the American government was urging churches to remove their foreign missionaries from China, and denominational leaders expressed concern that "the continued presence of foreigners on the mission stations would cause embarrassment, and in some cases become a real source of danger to the national church leaders."<sup>29</sup> The General Conference Committee appeared to be nervous at the beginning of 1951 about whether the Communist government would also take control of Taiwan and made provision to transfer missionaries somewhere other than Taiwan.<sup>30</sup> By June 1951 the General Conference seemed more confident that the Taiwanese government would remain in the hands of the Kuomintang and tolerate foreign missionaries. The denominational leadership was, however, anxious to reduce the number of foreign denominational workers in China. Chinese Adventists expressed concern that so many foreign Adventist workers in Hong Kong, if the Chinese Communist Party should take over Hong Kong, would endanger them and the Seventh-day Adventist Church's continued existence in China.<sup>31</sup>

Having lost again most of her worldly goods evacuating from mainland China, four years later, in 1955, Dunn was granted rehabilitation funds (\$200.28) that covered an estimated 85 percent of the value of her goods left in Hankou.<sup>32</sup> In Taiwan Dunn continued her Bible work and spent substantial time training Taiwanese young people as Bible workers.<sup>33</sup> In 1960, after thirty years in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and an additional fourteen

years in the United States, Dunn filed for permanent return and retirement.<sup>34</sup> Two years later Dunn was among the retired employees especially invited to the 1962 General Conference Session.<sup>35</sup>

In retirement Dunn continued to be active as a Bible worker or assistant chaplain at Paradise Valley Hospital near San Diego, California and participated in the Palomar Nature Club and the Sixty-Plus Club. She held “wheelchair Sabbath School” classes for patients.<sup>36</sup> She also traveled to Adventist churches to promote missions and evangelism. She particularly promoted the meshing of personal evangelism with medical mission work.<sup>37</sup>

## Legacy

Dunn is mentioned in A. W. Spalding's *Origin and History of the Seventh-day Adventists*, but only her work with women is noted, not her extensive Bible work with men.<sup>38</sup> Clearly, her evangelistic efforts in China were so significant that Spalding could not fail to mention her. In her own writing, Dunn continually emphasized the necessity of missionaries working with local Adventists to obtain success in their evangelistic endeavors. As Dunn wrote about her fellow Chinese evangelists, “Truly we are laborers together with God. . . . Pastor Hsü, the local pastor, and Mrs. Hu, my associate Bible instructor, have labored untiringly. . . . I thank the Lord for all these faithful laborers.”<sup>39</sup> Dunn's life story highlights the role of single women in Adventist missions and their dedication to the cause despite wars and hardship.

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