

Boiori, Wattafeni (d. 1999)

SHIRLEY TARBURTON

Shirley Tarburton, M.Litt. (Distinction) (University of New England, Armidale, New South Wales, Australia) retired in 2008 after 40 years teaching church-school (mainly high school but including eight years at university). An Australian, she has taught in four mission fields, Australia, and New Zealand. She has authored five books and co-authored one on church history, biography and family history, as well as several magazine articles. She is married to Dr. Michael Tarburton with two adult children and four grandchildren.

Wattafeni Boiori ('Watti') was a Papuan who was baptized as one of the first Seventh-day Adventists in Papua. He spent his life working for the church and was a pioneer missionary in the Papuan Gulf.

Early Life

It is not known exactly when Watti was born as birth dates were not important in the culture of his people and there was no record kept. In later years he guessed he was about twelve when pioneer Australian SDA missionary Septimus Carr negotiated with Watti's father to obtain a lease of tribal land for a mission station in 1909.¹ However, a later writer, Pastor Harold C. White, stated in 1924 that Watti was about fourteen years of age at the time he wrote.² Watti was born in Eikiri village³ and was the son of Boiori, an elder of the Koiari, a mountain tribe of south-central Papua New Guinea (PNG).⁴ The Koiari are the people through whose land the "Kokoda Track" of World War II fame passes. Traditionally the Koiari were a very war-like people who built their houses high in trees for defensive purposes.

When Septimus Carr and his Fijian associate, Peni Tavodi, were searching for land for a mission station in 1909, the negotiations were made with Watti's father, Boiori, and two other elders of their tribe, Yobue and Yarea.⁵ The church was not permitted to open a mission station on the land they leased until 1911 but they were allowed to plant a rubber plantation⁶ Local workers signed one-year contracts and lived on site. They worked daily clearing the land and planting rubber trees, with food crops in between.⁷ At night classes were run for these workers and the scriptures were taught along with some elements of reading, writing, and arithmetic.⁸ Later, a school was started.⁹

Education

Watti's father wanted his son to have the advantages that could be obtained through education and, later, through association with the missionaries. He first attended Marketanumu Mission School in the mountains. After marriage, he attended the Mirigeda SDA Workers Training School¹⁰ which opened on February 27, 1933.¹¹ It was here as an adult that he completed grade three level of schooling and received missionary training.¹²

Conversion



Watti Boiori
Photo courtesy of Shirley Tarburton.

As a child, Watti associated with those on the Bisiatabu Mission, especially with Peni Tavodi, a Fijian missionary worker who was at the mission from its establishment until his premature death in 1918.¹³ Watti admired Peni and spent much time with him. Peni taught him about Christ and salvation¹⁴ as well as teaching him to speak Fijian through which they enjoyed conversing. Watti could still converse in Fijian in 1998.¹⁵

In early 1924 Watti was at Bisiatabu with Meia Yaria, a friend from his home village, and they both decided they wanted to be baptised. Watti said, (translated) "I also want to follow Jesus that I might be His workman. The longing of my heart is that I might be able to have everlasting life. I request at this time that I might follow in the way Jesus has marked out by following Him in baptism."¹⁶

Both young men joined the baptismal class run by Gerald Peacock, the teacher at Bisiatabu, and became part of the group of eleven candidates who were among the first converts to be baptised in Papua (now Papua New Guinea). All of them appear to be in their mid-teens in the photo of the occasion that was published in the *Australasian Record*.¹⁷ The baptism took place on October 25, 1924, and was conducted by Pastor William Lock who had only been in the country for three months and who left the next day for his mission placement in the village of Efogi, in the mountainous Koiari territory.¹⁸ Watti developed a strong and lasting relationship with Pastor Lock and later with his missionary son, Lester. They associated together at various times over the years.¹⁹

Marriage and Family

Watti outlived three wives when he passed away. His fourth wife survived him. His first wife was Togoro Aino, and they had only one child before Togoro died—a daughter named Miriam who died in 1983 who was believed to be somewhere in her sixties at the time.²⁰ After Togoro died, Watti married Wodoru Noaino, and they had no children. When Wodoru died, Watti then married Orila Guba, and they had two sons, Moses and Boiori. Sometime in the 1950s Orila died and Watti married Dorobe Beremu who was a widow with a daughter, Seia. Together Watti and Dorobe had four children – three sons, Joel, born about 1957, Bagua, born July 15, 1959, Moku, born about 1961, and then a daughter, Ruth.²¹ Dorobe passed away between 2010 and 2013.²²

Work and Ministry

After Watti completed his training at Mirigeda, he and his wife were sent to the Papuan Gulf as pioneer SDA missionaries.²³ It was a difficult assignment because a different language, unknown to Watti, was spoken there. However, as many did at that time, he learned Motu, a trade language that was understood across much of the southern part of the country. It was also difficult because in those days New Guinea islanders dared not travel outside their home area. Strangers could be killed on sight and faced many other dangers. Watti taking the assignment showed great courage and trust in God.²⁴

After returning to his tribal area, Watti ministered for many years in a number of different villages.²⁵ Before World War II broke out, he served for some time as the farm manager at the Mirigeda Training School.²⁶ This was an important responsibility because the school farm not only supplied all the food for the students but also brought in some income to assist the running of the school. Leading up to his retirement, Watti was the farm manager at Bisiatabu and he retired there in June 1972.²⁷

Death

The twenty-six years of his retirement were active years. All his life he walked everywhere he wanted to go except when he was able to travel by sea. Up until shortly before his death, he walked the mountain trails with no indication of feebleness due to age or infirmity. He continued working his garden and providing for his family as well as taking church meetings. His unwrinkled face habitually carried a wide smile and he loved to encourage others in their Christian walk.²⁸ Watti also wrote some songs in his Koiari language.²⁹ He obtained great pleasure from associating with other believers and loved to meet with visiting church workers both local and from overseas.³⁰

In November 1999, Watti was attending church camp-meeting when he asked to be taken home to Bisiatabu as he was tired. His family took him home. He said he was too tired to eat and refused to take any more food. He died a few days later on November 15, 1999. When he was buried in Bisiatabu's little burial plot, a very large crowd assembled to show their respect for this humble man who stepped well out of his "comfort zone" and did what he could for God.³¹

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NOTES

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