

Cozens, Hugh Stowell (1887–1974) and Myra (Ford) (1886–1965)

MATTHEW (BERT) COZENS

Matthew (Bert) Cozens, B.A., B.Com., B.Ed., (University of Queensland) and his late wife, Norma, served for 41 years in teaching and pastoral ministry in the South Pacific Division, including 21 years as principal of 5 schools in the Pacific Islands. In retirement Bert donated a plaque at the Eelsey Cemetery for an Aboriginal lady, "Bettbett sleeps awaiting her Saviour's return and the gift of eternal life," which is seen by thousands of tourists each year.

Hugh Stowell and Myra Cozens were Australian missionaries to French Oceania and Cook Islands. They served the Seventh-day Adventist church in various other capacities.

Early Life of Hugh Stowell Cozens

Hugh Stowell Cozens was born at Cooby Creek, near Toowoomba, Queensland, Australia, on August 5, 1887. His father Benjamin was born in Haverford West, Wales, on April 1, 1836. His mother, Ann Bevan, was born on February 25, 1850, in Newport, Wales. They married in Wangaratta, Victoria, Australia, on February 21, 1871. Stowell's father died on July 20, 1894, and was buried at Highfields, near Toowoomba. His mother lived until July 20, 1944, and upon her death was buried in Toowoomba.¹



Myra and Hugh Stowell Cozens wedding, October 1914
Photo courtesy of Glenn Cozens.

Conversion to the Seventh-day Adventist Church in 1898

Through the work of several colporteurs and ministers, mother Ann became a Seventh-day Adventist in 1898.² In 1899 she and her children attended a camp meeting in Toowoomba, at which Mrs. White spoke. She and all ten of her children remained Seventh-day Adventists throughout their lives.³

Stowell was apprenticed to a saddler, a significant trade before the arrival of motorized vehicles. He served for a time in the church tent-house in Sydney. He then worked as a colporteur in northern New South Wales (NSW).⁴ In 1914, he graduated from the Missionary Course at Avondale School for Christian Workers.⁵ While working again as a colporteur, he renewed acquaintances with Myra Ford whom he had first met at Avondale.⁶

Early Life of Myra Ford

Myra Ford was born in Newcastle, Australia on August 2, 1886. Her father, George Gene Ford, was born on July 23, 1850, in Hooper's Cottage, West Alvington, near Kingsbridge, Devon, England. Her mother, Isabella Gilbert, was born on March 22, 1855, in Newcastle, NSW. They married in Newcastle on January 1, 1877. Before Myra was born, their children were Arthur Penberthy, born in Newcastle in 1877, Gilbert, born in Auckland, New Zealand in 1880, Edith, born in Auckland in 1882, and Rita, born in Newcastle in 1884. Two more sisters were born later, Bertha, in 1880 at Stockton, Newcastle, and Doris, in 1895 at Dora Creek, NSW.⁷

The family lived at Coal Street, Islington, a western suburb of Newcastle. The two boys attended Tighes Hill School. One day when they were 8 and 5, respectively, they did not arrive home after school. The next day their bodies were found in Tighes Creek.⁸ This tragedy was probably the cause of the family's moving to Stockton on the northern shore of Newcastle harbor. There, their home was burned. That tragedy saw the family moving to Gradwell's Road, Dora Creek, about 1893. George was one of the carpenters engaged to build "Bethel," the first building at Avondale School

for Christian Workers.⁹

These two tragedies in the family led indirectly to the decision to become Seventh-day Adventists.

When Avondale School for Christian Workers opened in 1897, Myra accompanied her sisters Edith and Rita as three of the first students at the school, walking each day the 5 kilometers through the forest in their ankle-length dresses, disturbing magpies, kookaburras, wallabies, goannas and snakes. Every Sabbath, they joined other students in their march from the school to the new church built more than one kilometer (nearly one mile) north of the classrooms. They often heard Mrs. White speak at the school and the church. They grew to love her. She lived about one kilometer east of the school. On Sabbaths, she often invited the three Ford girls home to lunch where they also enjoyed the company of her granddaughters Ella and Mabel White who were about the same age. Sometimes on Sabbath afternoons, Mrs. White arranged for her buggy driver to take the girls home, a welcome change from walking the five kilometers. (In 1900, Ella White was 18, Mabel White was 13; Edith Ford was 18, Rita Ford was 16 and Myra Ford was 14.)¹⁰

Education and Mission Service

On October 7, 1906, Myra graduated from the Teacher's Course at Avondale. At the graduation service, she, along with a number of her fellow graduates, delivered an address. Hers was entitled "Practical Education."¹¹ The following year, 1907, she began teaching at Hamilton, Newcastle.

However, she did not remain there long. Reflecting on his visit to the Hamilton school in early 1907, O.A. Olsen wrote:

On my return from Queensland I stopped at Newcastle to see Sister Myra Ford. . .to see if she saw her way clear to accept the call to go to Tonga to assist in the school work there. I am pleased to say that she has accepted the call. . . For some time I have put forth every effort possible to find a teacher for Tonga, without avail; therefore I feel very much relieved in my mind over this arrangement, and I believe the blessing of the Lord will be with Sister Ford, and make her a blessing to the work on that island.¹²

On June 26, 1907, still over a month before her twenty-first birthday, Myra left Sydney on the S.S. *Atua* bound for Tonga.¹³ In her letters she naturally wrote of just how much she missed those whom she held dear. At the same time her resolve to serve her Savior was unwavering. Her motto was "Take me as I am and use me as Thou wilt." On the ship bound for Tonga, for example, she took many opportunities to witness for her Savior and her Church.¹⁴

Myra taught in Tonga for almost two years, assisting Nellie Sisley. They had an enrolment of 57 students¹⁵ The parents were keen for the students to learn English. While it was important for them to learn to speak English fluently, Nellie and Myra were just as focused on teaching them of the love of Jesus.¹⁶ The 1907 school year culminated with an end-of-year function to which all the parents and local dignitaries were invited. Chairman Thorpe introduced the proceedings. The high chief and father of three pupils, Maafu, delivered an address. The pupils sang and recited poetry and verse.¹⁷

Back in Australia

Myra returned to Australia on March 24, 1909.¹⁸ She was appointed to teach at the newly-opened school in the Seventh-day Adventist Church building at Ashfield, Sydney.¹⁹ Cecil H. Pretyman presided at the closing exercises of the school on December 22, 1909, and reported that "the Spirit of the Lord was manifestly present."²⁰

In 1913 Myra was teaching in a new school at the home of James and Florence Emma Hill at Corndale, near Lismore, in the north of NSW.²¹ By 1914 she had moved with them 58 km (36 miles) northwest to a new location at Cedar Point, about 40 km (25 miles) south of the Queensland border.²²

That is where she again met the young colporteur named Hugh Stowell Cozens. On October 27, 1914, Myra and Stowell were married at the Ford home in Dora Creek by Pastor George Teasdale.²³ In 1988, 74 years later, Richmond Hill, a former pupil at Corndale and then at Cedar Point, wrote a complimentary letter of his former teacher, telling how much the pupils loved her and how sadly she was missed when the young colporteur claimed her attention.²⁴

Life and Service in French Oceania and Rarotonga

Soon after Stowell and Myra married, they were appointed to serve as missionaries in French Polynesia. They left Sydney on December 5, 1914.²⁵ They first spent a month with Will and Mabel Howse at Raiatea and then proceeded to Huahine.²⁶ They also worked on the islands of Tahiti, Moorea, Bora Bora, the Tuamotus and Rurutu.²⁷ At one stage Stowell left his wife and family behind at Tahiti for six months while he assisted a Tahitian minister named Tetaraa to work on Takume.²⁸ For a time in 1920 the Cozens also worked on Rarotonga in the Cook Islands.²⁹

Like other missionaries from America, Australia, and New Zealand, the Cozens encountered opposition from the local spirit worshippers, the London Missionary Society, the French Protestants, and the Roman Catholic Church. During World War I, the French Government even thought Stowell may have been a German spy (wrongly thinking that "Cozens" was a German name). The family worked in the islands without furlough for ten years. Travel between the

islands was by schooner. Passengers slept on copra bags in the company of copra bugs.³⁰

In 1923 the Cozens family moved to Rurutu to assist newcomers Albert and Greta Liston. Milton Hook wrote in the booklet, *Te Maramarama (The Lightbearer)*, about early Adventism in French Polynesia:

The Cozens family went to assist Liston . . . but made no headway in the face of the local boycott. No one would supply food to them or talk to them, except to ask, "When are you leaving?" The Listons did return to Papeete but Cozens remained and tried to endure the prejudice. On one occasion he attempted to get a hearing during a general assembly on the island, but the minister told the people to start singing. Cozens' voice was drowned in the din. The degree of opposition and the continuing shortage of food forced their departure in 1923. The islanders did not want missionaries who advocated a diet without pork.³¹

Stowell Junior told how one man used to bring food secretly. Thank God the family did not get smitten by the influenza epidemic which killed so many in that island and worldwide. The local minister frequently asked, "Is Cozens dead yet?"³²

The English-speaking missionaries encountered at least two other main problems. It seemed they did not stay long enough in each location, Cozens locating to seven places in nine-and-a-half years; and they simply were not French.³³

49 Years in Warburton, Victoria

The Cozens family returned to Australia on May 18, 1924.³⁴ They were naturally happy after the ten-year absence to meet family and friends again. Part of a letter from Stowell Cozens to *The Australasian Record*, October 20, 1924, read:

I am glad to say that I am feeling much better in health. Although my weight has not increased much yet, I feel more my old self.³⁵

The family did not return to the islands, but went to work for Sanitarium Health Foods (SHF) in Warburton, Victoria.³⁶ Stowell worked at the Warburton SHF until his retirement in 1965 at the age of 78 after 51 years of unbroken service.³⁷

Their family consisted of four boys:³⁸

Stowell George, born in Papeete, Tahiti	February 28, 1916
Lawrence Benjamin, born in Papeete, Tahiti	June 6, 1918
Irwin, born in Rarotonga	April 13, 1920
Matthew Penberthy (Bert), born in Wahroonga, NSW	December 16, 1924

Irwin died of meningitis in Melbourne, July 10, 1931.³⁹

Ben died in Yass, NSW, February 4, 1938, following a motor accident.⁴⁰

These deaths seemed to draw the parents closer than ever to God. They continued to pray for Stowell and Bert.⁴¹

Stowell and Myra were always mission minded. They both held offices in the Warburton Church. As a Sabbath School teacher Myra was much appreciated by the junior/teen-age girls such as Beryl Johanson/Stocken and Elma Blair/Coombe. Stowell's short, clear sermons were always appreciated and he was a regular worker at Busy Bees.⁴²

Instead of buying a home, they paid rent for a company house for 39 years, while investing every spare penny in God's work, rather than on toys such as motor cars, cameras, or even radios. They eventually lived frugally on the government old-age pension instead of accepting Church sustentation support for retired workers. In 1963, officials 1000 km away, who did not appreciate their devotion and generosity, required them to leave the company house. Their esteem in Warburton was demonstrated by the whole-hearted support that the church members and some towns people gave them in building a small cottage in 1964.⁴³

Myra died on March 13, 1965, while son Bert was principal of Kabiufa College in the highlands of Papua New Guinea.⁴⁴

Hugh Stowell died on September 20, 1974. In his obituary in *The Australasian Record*, October 1974, Pastor Hector

Kingston truthfully wrote:

If ever a man rendered dedicated service to the Sanitarium Health Food Company, it was he. Brother Cozens will long be remembered, not only for his service in the work of God, but also as a devoted elder of the Warburton Church, as an active layman, and a loving husband and father.⁴⁵

In addition to two years of mission service by Myra as a single person and then 10 years by Myra and Stowell:

Son, Bert, served 21 years in Vatuvonu School, Fiji; Parker Missionary School, New Hebrides (now Aore High School, Vanuatu); Kabiufa College, Papua New Guinea; Sonoma College, Papua New Guinea; Fulton College, Fiji.

Grand-daughter Wilma (Stowell Jr's daughter) has spent a total of 30 years in Mission service and, in 2018, continues to serve. She and her husband, Pak Lee, first served at Kambubu, Sonoma and Pacific Adventist University in Papua New Guinea for 14 years; then 14 years in Thailand and the Philippines; and are currently back at Pacific Adventist University in Papua New Guinea.

Grandson Glen (Bert's son) served 6 years in Kabiufa College, Papua New Guinea.

This constitutes a family total of 69 years in Mission service—and counting.⁴⁶

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