

# Wagner, Ernest August (1907–1994) and Lillie La Vona (Coltrin) (1909–2004)

---

## MILTON HOOK

Milton Hook, Ed.D. (Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, the United States). Hook retired in 1997 as a minister in the Greater Sydney Conference, Australia. An Australian by birth Hook has served the Church as a teacher at the elementary, academy and college levels, a missionary in Papua New Guinea, and as a local church pastor. In retirement he is a conjoint senior lecturer at Avondale College of Higher Education. He has authored *Flames Over Battle Creek*, *Avondale: Experiment on the Dora*, *Desmond Ford: Reformist Theologian*, *Gospel Revivalist* the *Seventh-day Adventist Heritage Series*, and many magazine articles. He is married to Noeleen and has two sons and three grandchildren.

---

Ernest Wagner was a medical director and surgeon at St Helena Sanitarium and Hospital, White Memorial Hospital, Canton Sanitarium and Hospital, Shanghai Medical Center, Paradise Valley Sanitarium and Hospital, and Sonora Community Hospital. He briefly engaged in government service at Fort Peck Hospital, Montana. He was a volunteer relief surgeon in Africa and the Orient.

## Early Years

Ernest Wagner was born in Everett, Washington State, on December 3, 1907. His parents, Peter and Martha (Hellinger) Wagner, were of German heritage.<sup>1</sup> His mother was a member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Ernest spent his early years in Everett and Marysville, Washington. He was baptized in Marysville in 1924 by Elder John Holbrook. He attended Walla Walla College, Washington, 1925 through 1927, and advanced to the College of Medical Evangelists (CME), Loma Linda, California. For six years he gradually worked through a Bachelor of Science degree and units of medical studies, serving his internship at St Helena Sanitarium and White Memorial Hospital, in 1933 and 1934. He graduated from CME in the class of 1934.<sup>2</sup> His reputation as a gifted surgeon was attributed to his training under Drs. George Thomason, Wilburn Smith, and Clarence Stafford.<sup>3</sup>

During his medical studies, on December 24, 1929, Ernest married Lillie La Vona Coltrin in La Sierra, California. After graduation he remained at White Memorial Hospital and was a resident surgeon. He and Lillie had three children, Ernest August, Jr. (b.1935), Charlotte La Vona (b.1937)<sup>4</sup> and a late addition, Douglas Powell (b.1951).<sup>5</sup>

## First Term in China

Ernest expressed a willingness to do overseas mission service. In 1935 he was selected to go to Bolivia, but the assignment was cancelled with a view for him to enter a more pressing need in China.<sup>6</sup> However, the Second

Sino-Japanese War caused a further change in plans, directing him to Penang.<sup>7</sup> Then, at the last minute, on October 3, 1937, a decision was made to send him to China.<sup>8</sup> Before embarkation Ernest spent a month at the Mayo Clinic for additional experience.<sup>9</sup>

Ernest was appointed medical director at Canton Sanitarium and Hospital in Guangdong Province, China. He and Lillie and their two infant children sailed on the "President Coolidge," arriving in Hong Kong on November 6, 1937.<sup>10</sup> After three months of study of the Cantonese language Ernest began duties at the hospital.<sup>11</sup>

Time spent in Canton presented an unforeseen challenge for Ernest. He had arranged a loan to pay his expenses while at the College of Medical Evangelists and was obliged to repay it monthly. He discovered that his small mission salary was insufficient to meet the payments, causing him significant stress.<sup>12</sup> War conditions made it dangerous to remain in Canton. Bombs fell within proximity to Ernest, his family, and the hospital. He sought assurance from church officials that they would pay his debts in the event of his death.<sup>13</sup> His distress was amplified by unexpected friction with Dr. Harry Miller, medical secretary for China. Dr. Miller performed all the major surgeries in the Canton institution, and Ernest felt he could be doing the same, not just the simple medical procedures.<sup>14</sup> Added to the family woes was the fact that Lillie contracted and suffered from bouts of malaria.<sup>15</sup> Although bombing subsided when the Japanese took control in Canton,<sup>16</sup> Ernest continued to negotiate for a return to America<sup>17</sup> and, after serving two years in Canton, returned to California in November 1940.<sup>18</sup>

## Back in America

During the Second World War years Ernest was a surgeon at Paradise Valley Sanitarium and Hospital, California. This term was broken by a nine-month period as a surgeon at Fort Peck Hospital, Montana.<sup>19</sup> In February 1945 Ernest informed church officials that he was willing to return to China.<sup>20</sup> Before going overseas he studied to take the exams from the American Board of Surgery, which he successfully completed by November 1946. He was ready to sail in early 1947.<sup>21</sup>

## Second Term in China

Ernest was appointed to the new Shanghai Sanitarium and Hospital. Church officials struggled to find a qualified anesthetist to assist Ernest.<sup>22</sup> To maintain his qualifications with the American Board of Surgery, he was required to work in that specialized field rather than reverting to general practice. He tolerated the circumstances for less than two years. Finally, on the last day of 1948, he and his family sailed from Shanghai on the "General Breckinridge" for San Francisco.<sup>23</sup>

## In the Homeland Again

When Ernest returned to California in 1949, he began an extended period as a surgeon at Paradise Valley Sanitarium and Hospital. He was listed as a staff physician<sup>24</sup> and served on the Board of Directors until 1961.<sup>25</sup> Ernest then joined a team of six doctors named the Sonora Medical Group connected to the Sonora Community Hospital in the mountains east of San Francisco, Sonora, California.<sup>26</sup> Once again, in addition to his surgical work he was a member of the Board of Directors. His name was listed until 1969.<sup>27</sup>

## Volunteer Mission Work

Both during and after his work with the Sonora Medical Group, Ernest volunteered to do overseas relief surgery on six occasions. For this purpose, he, Lillie, and their son Douglas, spent September through November 1966 at the Taiwan Sanitarium and Hospital.<sup>28</sup> The Sonora Medical Group agreed to continue his salary while he was on mission service.<sup>29</sup>

He took a break from volunteer work in the 1970s and resumed it in 1981. Ernest and Lillie spent two months at Bangkok Adventist Hospital early in 1981,<sup>30</sup> returned to America and then went back to Bangkok in May for another term,<sup>31</sup> and flew to Mwami Adventist Hospital in Zambia for three months in the last half of the year.<sup>32</sup> Early in 1982 they returned to the Orient to help at Bangkok Adventist Hospital, but proceeded to Penang Adventist Hospital, where they were more needed, serving there from March through May 1982.<sup>33</sup> Finally, during mid-September through mid-December 1983, they went to Haad Yai Mission Hospital in Thailand.<sup>34</sup> It was in response to a message from Dr Russell Standish at Penang, writing that the need was “desperate.” However, Ernest was disappointed with this assignment, there being only four patients needing surgery during his eight-week stay and two government hospitals were functioning in the vicinity,<sup>35</sup> circumstances he believed did not warrant a “desperate” call.<sup>36</sup>

Ernest passed away in 1994. Lillie passed away at the age of ninety-five in 2004. They rest together in Olivewood Cemetery, Riverside, California.<sup>37</sup>

---

### SOURCES

“Dr E.A. Wagner, wife and children...” *China Division Reporter*, November 1937.

“Ernest August Wagner.” *Find A Grave Memorial* ID 157461481, January 26, 2016. Accessed October 27, 2023. <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/157461481/ernest-wagner>

Miller, H.W. “China Medical Institutions and Personnel.” *China Division Reporter*, November 1938.

“Sailings.” *China Division Reporter*, November 15, 1940.

*Seventh-day Adventist Yearbooks*. General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Online Archives. <https://documents.adventistarchives.org/Yearbooks/Forms/Allitems.aspx>.

Wagner, Ernest August. Appointee Files, RG 21, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Silver Spring, MD, U.S.A. (GCA).

Wagner, Ernest August. Secretariat Files, RG 21, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Silver Spring, MD, U.S.A. (GCA).

---

## NOTES

1. Ernest August Wagner Appointee Files, December 31, 1983, RG 21, Record ID 5123, GCA.
2. Ernest August Wagner Biographical Information Blank, November 10, 1946, Secretariat Files, RG 21, Record 114951, GCA.
3. Letter, Percy T. Magan to Milton E. Kern, October 11, 1935, Appointee Files, RG 21, Record ID 5123, GCA.
4. "Ernest August Wagner," Biographical Information Blank.
5. "Ernest August Wagner," Appointee Files.
6. Letter, Milton Kern to Ernest Wagner, January 1, 1936, Appointee Files, RG 21, Record ID 5123, GCA.
7. Letter, A.W. Cormack to E.A. Wagner, September 9, 1937, Appointee Files, RG 21, Record ID 5123, GCA.
8. Letter, A.W. Cormack to E.A. Wagner, October 3, 1937, Appointee Files, RG 21, Record ID 5123, GCA.
9. Letter, E.A. Wagner to E.D. Dick, May 2, 1937, Appointee Files, RG 21, Record ID 5123, GCA.
10. "Dr. E.A. Wagner, wife and children..." *China Division Reporter*, November 1937, 8.
11. H.W. Miller, "China Medical Institutions and Personnel," *China Division Reporter*, November 1938, 4-5.
12. Letters, E.A. Wagner to G.C. Committee, June 12, 14, 1938, Appointee Files, RG 21, Record ID 5123, GCA.
13. Letter, A.W. Cormack to Frederick Griggs, June 26, 1938, Appointee Files, RG 21, Record ID 5123, GCA.
14. Letter, Frederick Griggs to A.W. Cormack, June 10, 1938, Appointee Files, RG 21, Record ID 5123, GCA.
15. Letter, E.A. Wagner to W.P. Bradley, September 9, 1949, Appointee Files, RG 21, Record ID 5123, GCA.
16. Letter, A.W. Cormack to W.H. Branson, November 18, 1938, Appointee Files, RG 21, Record ID 5123, GCA.
17. Letter, E.A. Wagner to A.L. Ham, November 1, 1938, Appointee Files, RG 21, Record ID 5123, GCA.

18. "Sailings," *China Division Reporter*, November 15, 1940, 8.
19. "Ernest August Wagner," Biographical Information Blank.
20. Letter, E.A. Wagner to E.D. Dick, February 13, 1945, Appointee Files, RG 21, Record ID 5123, GCA.
21. Letter, W.P. Bradley to W. H. Branson, October 2, 1946, Appointee Files, RG 21, Record ID 5123, GCA.
22. Letter, E.A. Wagner to N.W. Dunn, November 10, 1947, Appointee Files, RG 21, Record ID 5123, GCA.
23. E.g., *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* for 1949, 308-309.
24. E.g., *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* for 1951, 298-299.
25. E.g., *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* for 1961, 300.
26. Letter, E.A. Wagner to Duane Johnson, April 21, 1966, Appointee Files, RG 21, Record ID 5123, GCA.
27. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* for 1969, 396-397.
28. Letter, Duane Johnson to E.A. Wagner, August 17, 1966, Appointee Files, RG 21, Record ID 5123, GCA.
29. Letter, Duane Johnson to K.H. Emmerson, March 23, 1966, Appointee Files, RG 21, Record ID 5123, GCA.
30. "Dispatch Notice to Treasurer," December 17, 1980, Appointee Files, RG 21, Record ID 5123, GCA.,
31. Letter, D.A. Roth to Gary Wagner, November 5, 1981, Appointee Files, RG 21, Record ID 5123, GCA.
32. "Committee on Appointees," July 1, 1981, Appointee Files, RG 21, Record ID 5123, GCA.
33. "Volunteer Workers," May 6, 1982, Appointee Files, RG 21, Record ID 5123, GCA.
34. "Committee on Appointees," August 10, 1983, Appointee Files, RG 21, Record ID 5123, GCA.
35. Letter, D.A. Roth to R.R. Standish, January 9, 1986, Appointee Files, RG 21, Record ID 5123, GCA.
36. Letter, E.A. Wagner to D.A. Roth, December 7, 1983, Appointee Files, RG 21, Record ID 5123, GCA.
37. "Ernest Wagner," *Find A Grave Memorial* ID 157461481, January 26, 2016, accessed October 27, 2023, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/157461481/ernest-wagner>.

---

encyclopedia.adventist.org is an official website of the [Seventh-day Adventist World Church](#)

© 2020 General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 12501 Old Columbia Pike Silver Spring , MD 20904 USA 301-680-6000