

# Harper, Walter

## (1854–1937)

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Walter Harper was one of the pioneers of colporteur work in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Ellen White wrote counsels to him during his two divorces.

### Early Life

Harper was born October 4, 1854, in Metcalf County, Kentucky. He started out in the dry goods business. In 1879, he became a Seventh-day Adventist.<sup>1</sup>

### Colporteur Work

Harper became convinced that God wanted him to sell Adventist literature from door to door. Not everyone was convinced that his method would work, some believed that “The public will not buy our books.”<sup>2</sup> His method as well as that of other early Adventist colporteurs was presumably based on that of the American Tract Society. Reports on the colporteurs from the American Tract Society were frequently reprinted in Adventist periodicals.

Harper was associated with George A. King (1847-1906), who had been trained in 1880 by John Harvey Kellogg to canvas books. The two men were some of the earliest literature salesmen who became known as colporteurs.<sup>3</sup>

Harper began “canvassing” on May 8, 1881, in Fresno County, California, selling J. H. Kellogg’s *Home Hand Book*.<sup>4</sup> The very first book he sold was to Mary Archambeau (1849-1932) who as a result converted to Adventism.<sup>5</sup> He was among the first to sell the combined subscription edition of Uriah Smith’s *Thoughts on Daniel and the*



Walter Harper

Photo courtesy of Michael W. Campbell.

*Revelation*. After about 18 months he went to San Luis Obispo County where he primarily sold Smith's book. He then took a steamer for Oregon in the spring of 1883.<sup>6</sup> That year he sold so many books that he "taxed the Pacific Press" to fill all the orders he took.<sup>7</sup> In 1884 when the "first subscription edition" of *The Great Controversy* came off the press he enthusiastically embraced selling it.<sup>8</sup> He considered it his favorite book to share with others as "the heaven-sent torch of truth."<sup>9</sup>

Harper traveled widely distributing and selling literature from Alaska to Mexico, and across Canada.<sup>10</sup> He was a strong advocate of faithfully returning to God tithes and offerings. He was reported to have said: "When you give to God, He hands it right back to you."<sup>11</sup> From 1886 to 1890, he was in California and Oregon where he delivered 6,000 copies of *The Great Controversy*. In 1892 he was known to have delivered 3,000 "large books" worth an estimated \$7,000.<sup>12</sup> While King was a pioneer of the colporteur work in the eastern United States and Canada, Walter Harper became the earliest and most prominent pioneer of colportering west of the Mississippi River.

## Marriages

By 1888, Harper had married Laura Osborne. As a youth, he had taken literally Matthew 19:12 and castrated himself.<sup>13</sup> Their relationship along with his situation prompted a series of counsels from Ellen White in which she cautioned church members against gossip.<sup>14</sup> White counseled the couple and urged Laura to remain with Walter when their marriage began to disintegrate.<sup>15</sup> White eventually recommended Laura's name to her daughter-in-law, Mary White, as a cook but expressed concern that Walter would continue to try to contact her. By that point, White told her daughter-in-law that Laura would "never consent to live with Walter." White concluded that she left Laura "to settle with her God in regard to this matter."<sup>16</sup> Laura divorced him on September 2, 1892.<sup>17</sup>

Ellen White felt that Harper could remarry and receive the "affection of a woman who knowing his physical defect, shall choose to give him her love."<sup>18</sup> On March 6, 1895, he married Florence Ketring (1870-1945), but conflict soon arose. Ellen White's letters indicate that Harper "behaved as a harsh schoolmaster" towards her, tried to prevent her from caring for her grandfather and mother, and did not adequately financially support her.<sup>19</sup> W. C. White wrote that he was concerned about Harper's tendency to "dominate." Although Florence "was willing to marry him, knowing his physical condition, but not knowing, as she has learned since, his temperament."<sup>20</sup> Florence enrolled in the nurses' course at St. Helena Sanitarium while he traveled, but although he was a prosperous book salesperson, he did not provide her with money and separated her from her family. Harper continued though to give donations to Ellen White. Knowing her situation, Ellen White gave a portion of the money to assist Florence, but when Walter discovered that she was assisting his wife, he threatened to not contribute any more funds for missionary projects.<sup>21</sup> Ellen White admonished him for these actions, represented to him what a wonderful Christian woman Florence was, urged him to stop treating his wife like a child and give her money, and warned him that their marriage would end if he did not change.<sup>22</sup> By 1907, Ellen White encouraged Florence not to return to Walter as he had not changed and instead care for her mother and work

at an Adventist sanitarium.<sup>23</sup> Florence divorced him on September 8, 1911.<sup>24</sup> Amalia Goulbourne observes that Harper also had issues pertaining to pride and control.<sup>25</sup>

## Last Years

Despite personal failures, Harper continued to work as a literature evangelist well into his 70s.<sup>26</sup> He was remembered as a faithful pioneer colporteur who continued to distribute Adventist literature. His friends did note he was “an odd character” due to his “personality, his style of dress, his manner of speech, his little peculiarities” which “were all his own.” Yet he was a man of “deep conviction” who never hesitated to share his faith.<sup>27</sup> He was remembered in 1930 as the “oldest colporteur” in the publishing work at that time.<sup>28</sup> Another remembered how he “was a faithful seed sower as long as God gave him strength.”<sup>29</sup> Walter Harper died in Loma Linda, California, on June 15, 1937. He is buried in Montecito Memorial Park.<sup>30</sup>

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## NOTES

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8. Ibid.
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