

# Steele, William (1874–1951) and Millie Elliott (1872–1941)

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## 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.

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William and Millie Steele were among Adventism's earliest missionaries in Latin American and subsequently built up Spanish-speaking congregations in the United States.

## Early Years

William Steele was born on July 2, 1874, in Butler, Missouri.<sup>1</sup> His parents, Winfield Scott and Martha Ann Hill Steele, farmed at Charlotte, near Butler. William was the second of their seven children.<sup>2</sup> After an early education in public schools, he enrolled at Walla Walla College in eastern Washington in 1898. He was baptized by George W. Reaser soon after entering the college. William completed both the commercial and ministerial courses, graduating in 1902. He paid his tuition fees by canvassing books during the summers.<sup>3</sup>

On March 11, 1903, William married Millie Elliot Pelton at Spokane, Washington. Willard H. Saxby officiated at the ceremony. Millie was born to John and Margaret Wallers Elliot in Monroe, Michigan, on February 7, 1872. Widowed at a young age, Millie was drawn to the Seventh-day Adventist message through reading. She took a position as nurse and matron at the Adventist-operated Spokane Sanitarium in 1901, and held that position until her marriage in 1903. She was baptized by Williard Saxby in 1902.<sup>4</sup>

William and Millie had two daughters: Atah (b. 1907), who married William R. Ford; and Lydia (b. 1913), who married Miguel Sierra.<sup>5</sup>

## Pioneering Mission Work

In their first year of marriage, 1903-1904, Millie did private nursing while William taught at the church school in Union, Oregon. They then received an appointment to join a small band of pioneering missionaries at Valparaiso, Chile.<sup>6</sup> They remained until mid-1908, William acting as secretary-treasurer of the Chile Conference

in the later years.<sup>7</sup> Millie did translation and proofreading for the periodical *Señales de los Tiempos* (*Signs of the Times*).<sup>8</sup> They survived the devastating earthquake of August 16, 1906, that reduced Valparaiso to rubble and killed 3,882 people. It registered 8.2 on the Richter Scale, more than the San Francisco earthquake earlier in the year.<sup>9</sup> The Steeles lost virtually everything because their home burned in the subsequent fires. They had scarcely recovered from losing all in a house fire eight months earlier. For a time immediately after the earthquake they slept on the street.<sup>10</sup>

In June 1908 William transferred for a six-month term as superintendent of the Ecuador Mission. After a furlough in the United States, Steele was assigned to mission work on the Caribbean island of Puerto Rico. Prior to leaving for his appointment he was ordained by William A. Spicer in the Takoma Park, Maryland, church on July 28, 1909.<sup>11</sup> In Puerto Rico two colporteurs assisted Steele by selling *Señales de los Tiempos*. He began evangelism at Mayagüez at the western edge of the island and penetrated into the hinterland. Earliest reports spoke of 10 people receiving baptism.<sup>12</sup> By 1915 the membership numbered 85.<sup>13</sup> Two years later the total increased to 184.<sup>14</sup>

The Steeles moved to Santo Domingo (Dominican Republic), then part of the Puerto Rico Mission, in 1920. William taught Bible in the mission school and then was appointed the first superintendent of the Santo Domingo Mission when it was organized in 1924.<sup>15</sup> Millie served as secretary-treasurer and as head of the Sabbath School department.<sup>16</sup>

In 1927 William was appointed superintendent of the Venezuela Mission.<sup>17</sup> Millie gave leadership to the Sabbath School and Missionary Volunteer departments. By 1929 the mission had grown to six established churches with a total baptized membership of 203.<sup>18</sup>

## Spanish Work in the United States

On their permanent return to the United States, William and Millie located in rented rooms on West 42<sup>nd</sup> Street in the heart of New York city, in order to minister to the Spanish Church in the Greater New York Conference. The congregation steadily enlarged their leadership and totalled 100 by the end of 1936.<sup>19</sup> In 1937, William was asked to serve as the pastor for a group of Spanish churches in the Arizona Conference, building their numbers.<sup>20</sup>

The Steeles moved to Takoma Park, Maryland, in 1939. William engaged in evangelistic colporteur ministry for about three years before retiring due to declining health.<sup>21</sup> Millie passed away at Takoma Park on December 8, 1941.<sup>22</sup>

In 1944 William remarried. Like Millie, his new bride, Mae Sarah Files, was a trained nurse.<sup>23</sup> They remained in the Takoma Park area. It was there that William passed away on December 18, 1951.<sup>24</sup>

"Greater New York Conference News Notes." *Atlantic Union Gleaner*, January 27, 1937.

"Millie Elliott Steele obituary." *ARH*, January 29, 1942.

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Steele, Mrs. Wm [Millie]. "In the Valparaiso (Chile) Earthquake." *ARH*, January 17, 1907.

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"Winfield Scott Steele." *FamilySearch*. Accessed July 24, 2022.

<https://www.familysearch.org/tree/pedigree/landscape/KNHW-C6Y>.

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## NOTES

1. "William Steele obituary," *Columbia Union Visitor*, March 13, 1952, 10.
2. "Winfield Scott Steele," *FamilySearch*, accessed July 24, 2022, <https://www.familysearch.org/tree/pedigree/landscape/KNHW-C6Y>.
3. William Steele Biographical Information Blank, June 21, 1912. Secretariat Missionary Files, RG 21, Record 114945, GCA.
4. Millie E. Steele Biographical Information Blank, June 21, 1912. Secretariat Missionary Files, RG 21, Record 114945, GCA; William Steele and Millie E Elliott Person, 1903, in "Washington, County Marriages, 1855-2008," *FamilySearch*, accessed September 7, 2022, <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:QPMR-1P6C>.
5. Atah's birth is recorded in William Steele's Biographical Information Blank, June 21, 1912. The year given here for Lydia Steele Sierra's birth is probable but imprecise, based "Immigration & Emigration" documents at Ancestry.com.
6. "William Steele," Secretariat Missionary Files.
7. "Chile Conference," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* for 1908, 123.

8. "Millie E. Steele," Secretariat Missionary Files.
9. "Earthquakes with 1,000 or More Deaths since 1900," U.S. Geological Survey, accessed September 8, 2022, [https://web.archive.org/web/20130114225331/http://earthquake.usgs.gov/earthquakes/world/world\\_deaths.php](https://web.archive.org/web/20130114225331/http://earthquake.usgs.gov/earthquakes/world/world_deaths.php).
10. Mrs. Wm. [Millie] Steele, "In the Valparaiso (Chile) Earthquake," *ARH*, January 17, 1907, 18-19.
11. "William Steele," Secretariat Missionary Files.
12. Hans C.J. Walleker, "Visit to Porto Rico," *ARH*, December 28, 1911, 18.
13. Nelson Z. Town, "Progress in Porto Rico," *ARH*, September 9, 1915, 10-11.
14. William A. Spicer, "Seen and Heard in Porto Rico," *ARH*, January 31, 1918, 17.
15. "William Steele," obituary.
16. "Santo Domingo Mission," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* for 1926, 212.
17. "William Steele," obituary.
18. "Venezuela Mission," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* for 1929, 257.
19. "Ministerial Directory," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* for 1930, 426; "Greater New York Conference News Notes," *Atlantic Union Gleaner*, January 27, 1937, 4.
20. "William Steele obituary."
21. *Ibid.*
22. "Minnie Elliott Steele obituary," *ARH*, January 29, 1942, 28.
23. Russell Quackenbush, "Mae Sarah Steele," *ARH*, April 13, 1961, 11.
24. "William Steele obituary."

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