



John Ellis Tenney and his wife Rosabel May with their four children, Earl Edwin, Vera Edith, Irma (Betty) Elizabeth, and Gordon Ellis, c. 1905.

Photo courtesy of flickr.com.

Tenney, John Ellis (1861–1911)

DENNIS PETTIBONE

Dennis Pettibone, Ph.D. (University of California, Riverside), is professor emeritus of history at Southern Adventist University. He and his first wife, Carol Jean Nelson Pettibone (now deceased) have two grown daughters. He is now married to the former Rebecca Aufderhar. His published writings include *A Century of Challenge: the Story of Southern College* and the second half of *His Story in Our Time*.

John Ellis Tenney, professor at Battle Creek College¹ and later principal of Southern Training School, was born on July 21, 1861 in Adams County, Wisconsin. His parents were Alpheus Tenney (1811-1900) and Charlotte Moore Starkweather Tenney (1815-1881).²

John Tenney married Rosabella May Seely (1865-1955) on April 14, 1887. The ceremony was performed by the groom's brother, George C. Tenney, a Seventh-day Adventist minister. They had four children: Earl Edwin Tenney (1888-1961), Vera Edith Tenney Houpt (1889-1970), Gordon Ellis Tenney (1894-1964),³ and Irma (Betty) Elizabeth Kloppenberg (1897-1984).⁴

Early in his career, it appears, Tenney was a public high school principal. Then he taught rhetoric and literature at Battle Creek College.⁵ After that, he served as principal of Woodland Industrial School, a forerunner of Wisconsin Academy, from 1899 to 1901.⁶ From 1901 to 1906, he was principal of Southern Training School (STS) in Graysville Tennessee. This school was a forerunner of Southern Adventist University.⁷

Ellen White visited Graysville in 1904 and was positively impressed by much of what she saw. Nevertheless, she wrote to George I. Butler, at that time president of the Southern Union Conference, that she was "greatly burdened because of the disunity coming in among our people" there. Her concern was well-founded, but so were her positive impressions.⁸

One of Tenney's achievements at Graysville was the establishment of a teacher training program, complete with a demonstration elementary school. He encouraged his teachers to rely upon the Lord in their teaching, to show a personal interest in their students, and to be enthusiastic in their presentations. Nevertheless, his administration was plagued by problems, frustration, and conflict. He felt that he had inadequate time to tend to his administrative duties because he was expected to teach classes as well as supervise the school. He was also dismayed that students were earning so much of their tuition instead of paying cash to the institution.⁹

Tenney seemed to be perpetually at war with what had become a comparatively large Adventist community in Graysville, believing that local church members were interfering too much in the school's affairs. One source of tension was the rivalry between the demonstration school and the local church school. Another was the time of day the school chose to have their Week of Prayer meetings. A more serious source of conflict involved decisions to retain or terminate certain faculty members. Other problems involved declining enrollment and the difficulty of retaining dormitory deans.¹⁰

Board Chairman R. M. Kilgore wanted to make enabling students to earn their expenses "an important priority." The STS board responded by adopting an innovative plan by which students could earn enough money at the school to pay for three years of schooling. This caused Tenney to threaten to resign. Butler persuaded him to remain for another year.¹¹ When Tenney finally did resign, he remained on the board for at least one more year.

¹² Perhaps it was during this period of time that he wrote *A Manual for the Use of Church and Mission Schools of the Southern Union Conference of Seventh-Day Adventists*.¹³

Tenney left denominational employment when he left Graysville. He was a representative for the Howard Severance Publishing Company from then until his death.¹⁴ He was only 49 years old when he passed away on April 11, 1911. He is buried in Oak Hill Cemetery in Battle Creek, Michigan,¹⁵ the same cemetery where James and Ellen White and several other of the early Adventist pioneers were buried.

SOURCES

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NOTES

1. Emmett K. VandeVere, *The Wisdom Seekers* (Nashville: Southern Publishing Association, 1972), 85.
2. <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/15837779/john-ellis-tenney>. Accessed June 7, 2021.
3. Ibid.
4. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/28333802@N04/4781129731>. Accessed June 11, 2021; <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/176414510391195870/>. Accessed June 11, 2021; https://www.ancestry.com/search/?name=Irma++Elizabeth_+Tenney++. Accessed June 11, 2021.
5. VandeVere, 85.
6. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* (1996), s.v. "Wisconsin Academy."
7. Dennis Pettibone, *A Century of Challenge: The Story of Southern College, 1892-1992* (Collegedale, TN: The College Press, 1992), 31.
8. Ibid., 32.
9. Ibid., 31-32, 37.
10. Ibid., 32-36.

11. Ibid., 38.
12. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1908), 78, <https://documents.adventistarchives.org/Yearbooks/YB1908.pdf>.
13. <https://www.amazon.com.mx/Mission-Southern-Conference-Seventh-Day-Adventists/dp/1373796863>. Accessed June 21, 2021.
14. Elva B. Gardner, *Southern Missionary College: A School of His Planning* revised by J. Mabel Wood (Collegedale, TN: Southern Missionary College Board of Trustees, 1975), 262.
15. <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/15837779/john-ellis-tenney>. Accessed June 7, 2021.

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