

Shireman, Dan T.

(1834–1920)

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Dan T. Shireman engaged in self-supporting educational work and personal evangelism for more than four decades, most extensively in North Carolina.

Early Life

Dan T. Shireman was born in 1834 in Shiremanstown, Pennsylvania.¹ As a child, Shireman endured poverty, hardships, and tragedy. His mother died when he was only four, and three years later in 1841, his father died in a train explosion, leaving Shireman an orphan. Consequently, at an early age, he was forced to learn how to sleep in the woods and in barns, on haystacks and on lumber piles. He wore his clothes “until they were in strings and rags.” People drove him away when they saw him “filled with vermin on his head and body,” concerned that he may have a contagious disease. Having endured this kind of treatment, he vowed that “if ever he had his own home, he would never turn a needy person away.”²

As a young man Shireman mastered several trades, including carpentry, general mechanics, and brick masonry. He also developed physical strength and great endurance, which enabled him to walk long distances. At the age of 16, he walked the entire way from northern Illinois to Iowa, where he supported himself with various jobs.³

Marriage, Conversion and Early Ministry



Grave of Dan T. Shireman.

Photo courtesy of Virginia Arnold. Source: *Find a Grave*, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/62369916/daniel-tobias-shireman>

In Iowa, Shireman met Amelia McDowell, a young woman from Ohio, and married her on April 17, 1857. A year later, in 1858, while in Lisbon, Iowa, the young couple heard Adventist preachers Josiah Hart and C. W. Sperry explain the Sabbath truth. It took Shireman only thirty minutes to become convinced by the message. He and his wife “both embraced present truth”⁴ and became lifelong, active missionaries who did much of their work on a self-supporting basis.

Their first endeavor was to establish an Adventist presence in Amelia Shireman’s hometown, West Union, Iowa. Though their efforts failed to convince her parents, the couple succeeded in introducing the Adventist message to Mary Jane Daniells, the mother of Arthur G. Daniells (1858-1935), who would become president of the General Conference.⁵

In 1860, Dan Shireman walked from West Union to Marion, Iowa, to attend a conference meeting. The 160-mile walk, round-trip, was his longest ever. His deep longing for fellowship with believers was rewarded, and in Marion he met James and Ellen White for the first time.⁶

A Commission from Heaven

A dramatic turning point in the Shiremans’ ministry took place in 1887. According to an account held in the General Conference Archives, an “Angel of the Lord” challenged them to proclaim, as quickly as possible, that “The Lord is coming.” The angel also wrote out a passage of scripture: “God will have all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4). The messenger then signed the message “Christ’s Expositor,” before suddenly disappearing.⁷ Ellen White later affirmed that “a Messenger of Heaven” had “appeared to Brother Shireman on a certain occasion.”⁸ This experience of divine commissioning strengthened the Shiremans’ conviction about their calling, and guided their determination to do all in their power for the rest of their lives to make the gospel message known.

The General Conference committee also affirmed their ministry, issuing Dan Shireman a ministerial license in 1891, and Amelia Shireman missionary credentials in 1892. At the 1893 session, the General Conference recommended Dan Shireman for ordination and issued him ministerial credentials.⁹

North Carolina: Opening New Fields

The 1890s marked a new phase of their ministry, conducted in the mountains of North Carolina. Elder Shireman was well-received by the mountaineers, who loved him for his Christian simplicity and genuine love of people. Seeing the needs of the people, he built not only churches, but also small schools.

Their most notable success came in Hildebran. After conducting a tent meeting there in 1896, Shireman built up an Adventist community center that included a school, teachers’ home, student housing, farm and farmhouse, blacksmith shop, and chapel. Amelia Shireman supervised the students’ dormitory as “Matron of the Home.”¹⁰

The *Hickory Mercury* newspaper praised the Adventist pastor for “the vast amount of good one live, energetic, persevering Christian man can do in a neighborhood.”¹¹

In 1905, the Shiremans turned the Hildebran school complex over to the North Carolina Conference and set their sights on fulfilling a request from the citizens of Toluca to develop a similar work there. The transition to Toluca, North Carolina, was also a time of pain and loss for the couple. On March 24, 1905, Amelia Shireman succumbed to stomach cancer, a five-month struggle in which she was a “great sufferer.”

The couple’s self-supporting and self-sacrificial service had to a large extent been funded by Dan Shireman’s skill as a builder. No less than forty-three times during their forty years of active labor in the Adventist cause, they had moved into a new house that Shireman constructed and then sold at a profit. Throughout their sojourn, Amelia Shirman had been “a full sharer in the labors of her husband.”¹² The couple had been united in “tender sympathy for the poor.” They had also suffered together in the loss of all six of their children, none of whom survived beyond their teens. With his wife now gone as well, Shireman felt “like a lone tree in a field with all the trees in the forest cut down.”¹³

In keeping with the commitment Shireman had made as a penniless orphan, the couple had always made their home a refuge for the poor. In Toluca, Shireman, at age 71, took that aspiration further, putting in 16-18 hours days to build, along with a school, an orphanage that could accommodate 15-20 in a family setting. He went on to establish small institutions like those in Toluca in other mountain communities in North Carolina. In 1907, he gained a new partner in life and ministry when he married Nellie Maples, the 67-year-old widow of A. L. Maples.¹⁴ Finally, dangerous accidents and injuries prompted him, at age 77, to reluctantly accept the counsel of Ellen White and other church leaders to retire from his building career.¹⁵

A Final Phase of Ministry

In 1911, briefly summarizing for Ellen White his work “since coming south,” Shireman wrote:

[W]e have had some three, or four hundred children in the schools and homes we have conducted during these years, and quite a number were orphan and destitute children. We expect to see fruit in the City of God. We have toiled hard and denied ourselves many comforts we might have had; but how could we when we saw so much ignorance and poverty all around us?¹⁶

Though unable to do the hard, physical labor he done for so many years, Shireman declared, “I cannot sit down in idleness.” Dan and Nellie Shireman, along with an elderly woman and her disabled daughter whom they had taken into their home, engaged in a “correspondence ministry,” writing personal letters of gospel encouragement and guidance to those whom they could interest.

“We have written hundreds of letters our own hands, in this way we have spent many an hour from 1 a.m. till the morning,” Shireman reported. The daughter boarding with them, despite the disability that made her reliant

on crutches, had become “quite a help” because she was a good writer and, since moving into the Shiremans’ home, had learned to use the typewriter. In the day-time, the Shiremans visited neighbors, providing them with Adventist literature, and inviting them to simple gospel meetings held in the evenings.¹⁷

In 1914, Dan and Nellie Shireman moved to Glen Alpine, North Carolina. Their eleven-year partnership came to an end when Nellie Shireman passed away on October 9, 1918.¹⁸ Fifteen months later, on January 26, 1920, Elder Dan T. Shireman died at the age of 85. He was laid to rest beside Amelia in the cemetery at Hildebran, North Carolina.¹⁹

Contribution

Church historian Bert Haloviak has effectively summarized Shireman’s distinctive contribution to the Adventist heritage:

Most Adventist ministers of the time centered their evangelism on debates. Dan Shireman, however, became a forerunner of the caring pastoral ministry. He responded to Ellen White’s call for families to enter areas that had no Adventists. In such places the gospel message would flourish because of Sabbathkeepers who moved in and lived humble lives that witnessed to their neighbors.²⁰

Ellen White repeatedly affirmed Dan Shireman’s ministry as exemplary. In 1902, for example, she wrote:

He has entered needy, unpromising places and has done a noble work to advance the truth. His efforts have been in accordance with the will of the Lord. And God has honored his faith by giving him success...

Many more should work as Brother Shireman has been working.²¹

Ellen White characterized the Shiremans’ ministry as an “object lesson” showing that the gospel labor of those whose gifts may differ from those typically associated with professional ministry is not only of equal value but essential to reaching those whom other ministers, despite their eloquence and education, cannot reach. At the same time, she wanted the Shiremans to recognize that those equipped with the training they lacked were also needed to do things they could not do. They should not feel threatened by those with greater education or higher position nor be overly-sensitive about what others thought of them.²²

Brother and Sister Shireman have their appointed work...So far as they have the ability, they can do good work in opening new schools; but others must come to their help to carry the school work forward on a higher plane of disciplinary and educational training than they could...

The Lord has graciously fitted Brother Shireman to do a certain work. Not all men can do the work that he by his Christian experience is able to do. He can do excellent work in opening new fields, beginning in a humble way, and meeting the people where they are, coarse and rough though they may be. Working with Christ, he can

adapt himself to the situation, winning the hearts of many...

Let the truth fall from his lips in simple prayers and talks. In his unpretentious way he can reach a class that ministers generally cannot touch.²³

In one of his last articles published in the *Review and Herald*, Dan Shireman expressed in brief the guiding convictions that he followed with exceptional dedication throughout his ministry: "Often the daily life will preach louder than words. We should live as if we believe with our whole hearts that the Lord is soon coming."²⁴

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NOTES

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4. J. O. Johnston, "Amelia Shireman obituary," *ARH*, April 6, 1905, 23; Haloviak, 19.
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10. "The School at Hildebran, North Carolina," *Gospel Herald*, June 1900, 46; Mrs. W. E. Carter, "The Hildebran, N. C., Church School," *Gospel Herald*, August 1900, 73.
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12. Johnston, "Amelia Shireman obituary."
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