



Abram La Rue, sketch by Russell Harlan.

La Rue, Abram (1822–1903)

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Abram La Rue (*Pinyin* yà bó lán lā lù) was a mariner, gold prospector, and tireless “colporteur and ship missionary”¹ who traveled the world and pioneered the Adventist work into Asia.

Early Life and Conversion to Adventism

Abram La Rue was born in New Jersey on November 25, 1822.² His parents, Joseph L. Rue (b. 1792) and Mary (b. 1797), were farmers.³ He was the only member of a rather large family of French origin known to survive.⁴ He was a seaman who traveled the world until about fifty years old.⁵ At age 11 he witnessed the 1833 meteor shower, “which he so often referred to as a sure token of the near coming of the Lord.”⁶

He traveled to Idaho and California where he mined for gold. He amassed a “considerable fortune” that was ultimately lost by fire and “bad investments.” After this he went to the Hawaiian Islands at the invitation of an old friend where he became a Christian.⁷ He afterward returned to California where he went up into the mountains and made a land claim.⁸ Up in the mountains he lived as a shepherd and woodcutter. After his conversion he joined the Dunkard Church.⁹ He lived a solitary life in the mountains doing his own cooking and taking care of his needs. An Adventist, Ruel Stickney, who owned a large sheep farm near Abram La Rue, left some tracts with a Dunkard preacher by the name of Mr. Studebaker. This preacher wanted nothing to do with Adventism. His wife became interested in these tracts that her husband wanted to get rid of, so she gave them to La Rue, who in turn studied them and accepted the Adventist message.¹⁰ The earliest documented indication of his newfound interactions with Adventism appears on May 6, 1873.¹¹

Mountain Ministry

La Rue after his conversion sold his farm to Ruel Stickney and became the caretaker of his farm, freeing him up so that he could more easily spend time distributing literature. The particular region was made up of immigrants from Switzerland and the Carolinas. They “greatly ridiculed” his attempts to share his faith. Some asked if the man who they perceived as lonely might take up smoking. Instead, he responded by pulling out his Bible and telling them: “This is my company.”¹² He continued as a mountain evangelist for the next eight years.

During the summer of 1876 several new families moved into the region where he lived, including a teacher and his family by the name of W. C. Grainger (1844-1896). He shared with them some evangelistic literature that eventually was tacked to the wall of their cabin. That winter the two families became interested in the literature and began Bible studies. A young minister, William Healey (1847-1932) heard about their interest and held evangelistic meetings. As a result, a small church was organized in Christine, California, which brought great happiness to Abram La Rue. After the death of Mr. Studebaker, Abram La Rue had the pleasure of bringing the minister’s widow, son, and daughter also into the Adventist message.¹³

About 1883 he went at the encouragement of W. C. Grainger, now president of Healdsburg College, to take “a course in Bible study.”¹⁴ Mrs. Grainger made him a special birthday cake to celebrate his 60th birthday while in school.¹⁵ With “perfectly white” hair he stood out in contrast with his youthful classmates as he shared his desire to become a missionary.¹⁶ Church leaders, recognizing his age and the challenge of learning a foreign language,

encouraged him to not travel so far and settle in one of the south Pacific Islands.

Missionary Across the Pacific

Abram La Rue “went to Hong Kong as a self-supporting missionary.”¹⁷ Adventist leader J. L. Shaw later remarked that it might “seem strange” that the “work in China” was started “by a man too old to learn the language and too old to be a mission pioneer.”¹⁸ In 1883 he wrote to church leaders expressing a desire to be a missionary to China. Church leaders responded telling him that they didn’t have money to send him. Instead, the Foreign Mission Board urged him to locate on “one of the islands in the Pacific.”¹⁹

At a “special meeting” held April 18-28, 1884, in Oakland, California, church leaders reported on “two laborers” who “will commence work” soon in the Sandwich Islands or the Kingdom of Hawaii beginning that May.²⁰ William Ings reported on a special “training class” at the church headquarters in California, at which they were training workers for mission service. William Ings hoped that “soon” Loron Allen Scott (1836-1910) and La Rue would leave to the mission field.²¹ It appears that believers raised approximately \$1,000 to help provide enough seed money for this missionary enterprise.²² The *Signs* reported on their departure from San Francisco on August 13, 1884. “We shall anxiously wait for information from them,” noted the editor.²³ Records indicate that they arrived on the ship *W. H. Dimond* on August 28, 1884.²⁴ At the time of their arrival, Scott was age 48 and La Rue age 60. Scott traveled across the Hawaiian islands conducting “city missionary” work whereas La Rue functioned as a “ship missionary.”²⁵ They distributed old copies of church periodicals and reported selling copies of J. H. Kellogg’s *Sunshine at Home*. They reported the “delightful weather” and “lovely” climate that made it easy to grow vegetables quickly. They had eaten peas, cucumbers, sweet potatoes, and peanuts that the missionaries had planted.²⁶ The missionary duo supplemented their income by selling imported dried fruits and health foods.²⁷ They established a “free reading-room and [book] depository at 189 Nuuanu Avenue.”²⁸ By the time S. N. Haskell stopped in Honolulu on May 18, 1885, they had already led thirteen people to accept the Adventist message and join the Adventist church through baptism. In answer to the call for a minister, William Healey left San Francisco on December 20, 1885. He stayed in Honolulu for about three months and conducted the first public evangelistic meetings with a borrowed tent from the California Conference. By the time Healey left, he had officially organized “a small company of Sabbath-keepers.”²⁹ On October 2, 1886, Scott and La Rue arrived in San Francisco to attend the California Camp Meeting.³⁰ While there, La Rue again made his case to the Foreign Mission Board to serve in Asia.

As Abram La Rue obtained a fresh supply of literature and distributed literature in the port, a friendly sea captain of a ship where he had formerly been a seaman told him: “We are leaving in a few days for Hong Kong. Come along.” On March 21, 1888, he left with them on board the ship *Velocity* from San Francisco and arrived in Hong Kong on May 3, 1888.³¹ As they traveled he befriended the crew and led one sailor, a Mr. Olson from Sweden, to God. When they arrived, Mr. Olson left the ship to assist his new teacher in sharing their faith. They

found a room on Arsenal Street near the harbor. "Publications sell well," he noted in a report sent soon after their arrival.³² He felt that by serving on the island of Hong Kong he technically fulfilled the stipulation of the Foreign Mission Board to serve on an island and that the strategic significance of Hong Kong made it particularly influential for sharing Adventist literature. When asked about his experiences with the Foreign Mission Board, Abram La Rue reported, "I have just kept within the borders of my commission."³³ Three months after arrival he noted that conditions were "unhealthful" as they were in the midst of a cholera outbreak.³⁴

His primary work was to reach people who passed through the port, especially those who spoke English, "doing ship-missionary work." In a letter written soon after his arrival in Hong Kong he wrote: "I suppose that Hong Kong is one of the hardest places in the world in which to accomplish anything with the third angel's message. But the ship work here is very important. The seed is being sown all over the Orient, and the Lord will take good care of the results. It will certainly be a savor of life unto life or of death unto death."³⁵

He continued his missionary ship work for the final years of his life.³⁶ His work was primarily for Europeans. This did not mean he did not try to reach the local Chinese. He befriended a Chinese gentleman, Mo Wen Chang, who was a translator for the colonial court and who stopped each day to worship at the Adventist mission.³⁷ He went on to translate the first Adventist tracts for La Rue. Now La Rue had literature that he could share in the Chinese language despite his faith and his inability to learn the Chinese language.³⁸ The first was called "The Judgment," of which he had 2,500 copies printed in 1891.³⁹ He also printed two small tracts written by Ellen G. White. The first was a "little tract" titled "The Love of God," and the second came from the chapter "The Sinner's Need of Christ" from Ellen G. White's *Steps to Christ*. These tracts were the first Seventh-day Adventist publications in Chinese.⁴⁰

Abraham La Rue made occasional trips, mostly across Asia, but in one instance traveled all the way to the Holy Land. Other trips brought him to Sarawak (north Borneo), Singapore, Shanghai, and Japan, distributing literature to every vessel he could find. "He was a man of great energy and ceaseless activity, to which was added a rare gift in meeting people and making sales. Hundreds of our books have thus been scattered in these parts."⁴¹ During an 1889 trip to Japan, La Rue stayed with some Seventh Day Baptist missionaries.⁴² Encouraged by the work that they were doing, he urged that missionaries were needed in Japan right away. This was a common refrain as La Rue repeatedly called for other missionaries to join him as he saw many new opportunities for spreading the Adventist message. Ever a visionary, by 1894 he arranged to translate the tract "The Sinner's Need of Christ" into the Japanese language (the very first Adventist publication translated into Japanese), sending it with a friendly ship officer.⁴³ Such urgent appeals sparked a resonating chord in his old friend, W. C. Grainger, who accepted the challenge to go to Japan. Similarly, "[o]n Palau Island, in the mid-Pacific, was a man who had accepted the advent faith through literature sent and missionary correspondence carried on."⁴⁴ The work of Abram La Rue across Asia was beginning to bear fruit.

Yet as he aged, he realized that due to his failing health and age soon someone needed to carry on his own work in Hong Kong. In 1901 he wrote: "I am very sorry that I have to give up the ship work, but I am so nearly worn out that I am obliged to do it."⁴⁵ In response, at the "great missionary" 1901 General Conference session, J. N. and Emma Anderson, with Ida Thompson, arrived in Hong Kong on February 2, 1902, just in time to baptize seven people on March 1, 1902—individuals La Rue had prepared for baptism.⁴⁶ J. N. Anderson noted that as "an old man" he was "still hale and hearty and fully of zeal in the cause of the Lord. While here he has been selling books, health foods, and fruits, and conducting a small mission in his home."⁴⁷ His home, located at 3 Arsenal Street, was subsequently turned into an outreach center. Even in the last few months of his life, he took pride that he had sold 18 additional books along with other tracts and papers.⁴⁸

Death and Legacy

Abram La Rue died in Hong Kong on April 26, 1903, from pneumonia from malaria and typhoid complications.⁴⁹ J. E. Fulton, after La Rue's death, recalled that "Brother La Rue never was known as a great preacher or a great administrator or a great leader in any other sense other than that he was a great follower of the Master, but he left his influence in the hearts of men." He was furthermore remembered "as gentle and tender as a father to all who came to him and never failed to speak a word for the Master."⁵⁰ Most people who knew him well referred to him simply as "Father La Rue."⁵¹ As a person he was remembered as a diminutive person: "of short stature, white-haired, and rather frail-looking" yet extremely persistent by asking people if they were ready to meet Jesus. "The Lord is coming very soon," he was remembered as urging, "suppose He should come tonight. Are you prepared?"⁵² J. N. Anderson, who followed in his footsteps as the first official Adventist missionary to China, described him as "sociable and affectionate" who possessed "a warm, genial, enthusiastic spirit." He was furthermore a man "of deep and profound convictions."⁵³ John Oss, another later missionary to China, described him as "a man with an indomitable will and a vision that ever burned brightly."⁵⁴ He told his friends that after he passed, he wanted "every cent" to be "invested in the cause." "His belief in the soon coming of Christ was strong, and to the last he cherished the hope that he might live until Jesus comes."⁵⁵

Abram La Rue's grave is located in the Protestant Cemetery (today Hong Kong Cemetery) in Happy Valley.⁵⁶ On the fiftieth anniversary of his arrival to Hong Kong, church members erected the Hong Kong "Pioneer Memorial Church" to commemorate his sacrificial life.⁵⁷

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