Halliwell, Leo Blair (1891–1967) and Jessie Rowley (1894–1962)

Leon B. Halliwell and Jessie Halliwell
Photo courtesy of Brazil National Center of Adventist History Archives, 2019.

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Leo Blair Halliwell, a native of Odessa, Nebraska, United States, was an outstanding missionary in Brazil, promoter of the mission medical boat project in the Amazon, and president of Bahia and Sergipe Mission, Lower Amazonas Mission, and North Brazil Union Mission. He was an engineer, navigator, nurse, administrator, and missionary. Jessie Rowley Halliwell, missionary nurse, served by her husband's side in northern Brazil.

Family Background and Early Years (1891–1921)

Samuel Blair Halliwell, Leo’s father, was a teenager in 1872 when his family arrived in the state of Nebraska, from
Pennsylvania. James Halliwell, Samuel’s father, was an Englishman who emigrated to the United States to work in a railway company. Later he settled in the fields as a farmer. Samuel married Mary Rall in 1884. Leo was born on October 15, 1891, and grew up in a rural agricultural work environment. He milked cows and drove the plow and the horse-drawn harvester. Leo had an older brother, Jack; an older sister, Della; a younger sister, Lilly; and a younger brother, Bob. Samuel and Mary Halliwell had their house in Odessa, Nebraska, nine miles from the city of Kearney. The children attended a school in front of their house. Leo studied there until the tenth grade.

In 1908–1909 Leo attended his last years of second grade school in Kearney. He especially liked math and chemistry. He graduated in 1909 with a diploma in Latin and science. The family couldn’t afford to pay for college, so before he turned 18, Leo became a teacher at a school in Grace, Idaho. His desire was to be an electrical engineer—to build dams and install turbines.

Jessie Rowley was born on February 22, 1894, in Waterloo, Nebraska, United States. In 1911 her family moved to Odessa, where the Halliwell family lived. At that time Leo learned to play the violin and used to encourage dance parties. Jessie worked in a supermarket in Kearney. At the end of the summer Leo (20 years old) and Jessie (18 years old) got engaged. They both wanted to study, then marry and work.

As planned, Leo B. Halliwell studied electrical engineering at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln. He worked for three years in a guest house to support himself while attending university. In the summer he worked in Kearney, where Jessie lived. There they encountered the Adventist message in a series of evangelistic conferences held by O. O. Bernstein in a big tent. Jessie attended every night and was baptized. Leo attended on Sundays and returned to Lincoln to continue his studies. Following her vocation, Jessie studied nursing at Nebraska Sanitarium.

Halliwell began working in the electrical department of the Hart Parr Tractor Company in Iowa. He wanted to get married, but Jessie wasn’t willing to marry someone who was not an Adventist. So Leo looked for a church in Iowa and was baptized. Jessie graduated in nursing on October 1, 1916, and they got married in Mason City, Iowa, on October 3, 1916, after six years of engagement. They lived in Charles City, Iowa, while Leo worked in government factories.

In a camp meeting L. B. Halliwell understood that he longed for more than just working in a factory. Shortly afterward the Halliwells collaborated with an evangelist sent for four months to Charles City to give lectures. Leo started to be more interested in the church than in his work. On October 24, 1918, their son Claris was born, whom they called Jack. At the time he received inspiration from reading several books, such as On the Trail of Livingstone, by William Harrison Anderson; and In the Land of the Incas, by Fernando Stahl. These books impressed him deeply and changed his ambitions and goals. The desire to work in the mission field arose.

In 1920 Halliwell resigned from the factory and offered his services to the church. His first work was to integrate an evangelizing team in Cedar Falls, Iowa. The evangelist got sick in the second week of the series of meetings, which were left in charge of Leo Halliwell. He then assumed a pastoral district in Forth Madison. After a year they received an invitation to be missionaries in Brazil. Friends and colleagues tried to discourage them. And they had no Adventist relatives who could support them. But they happily accepted the call.

**Missionary Service in Bahia and Sergipe (1921–1928)**

On October 15, 1921, Leo and Jessie embarked to Brazil. They arrived in Rio de Janeiro on October 30, 1921, and were welcomed by a group of workers. Days later they sailed to Salvador, Bahia, in the company of Gustavo S. Storch (1896–1993). Halliwell was appointed as president of Bahia Mission, in East Brazil Union and Storch was elected as secretary. The Halliwells served in that field for seven years (1921–1928).

They rented an old two-story house and basement in downtown Salvador for the headquarters of the mission, as well as housing for the workers Storch and the Halliwells. At the beginning there were few Adventists, and sorcery and spiritualism abounded. But soon three groups were formed in Salvador. Halliwell had to study Portuguese with a teacher and get used to the local culture. Jessie worked as an obstetrician nurse and made friends with many families. On August 20, 1922, their daughter Marian was born. During the same month Halliwell made his first tour inside the state in the company of Gustavo Storch. For two and a half months they traveled by train and boat, and on a donkey. They visited interested people, had meetings, distributed copies of the magazine O Atalaia, and organized groups in Porto Velho and Sítio do Mato. Leo B. Halliwell was ordained to the ministry on March 7, 1925, in a conference for Brazilian pastors and workers held in Brazil College, Capão Redondo, São Paulo.

**The Lower Amazonas Mission and the Luzeiro Boats Project (1929–1936)**

In 1927 the South American Division organized the Lower Amazonas Mission (states of Pará, Amazonas, Ceará, Maranhão, and Piauí, and federal territories of Acre, Amapá, and Rondônia). So the medical missionary work started along the Amazon. Leo Halliwell was president of Bahia and Sergipe Mission when he was called to Lower Amazonas Mission, in replacement of John Lewis Brown (1888–1972), pioneer in this field who had retired for health issues. The election occurred in December 1928, and the transfer happened in January 1929. Jack was 10 years old, and Marian was 6. They welcomed the German canvasser Hans Mayr (1905–2004) with his wife, Johanna L. Bräuer (1903–1983) and the Scottish canvasser André Gedrath (1875–1963). They rented a property in Belém, Pará, that would be used for church downstairs and for housing upstairs.
The Lower Amazonas Mission, in Brazil, covered an area of 1,650,080 square miles (4,273,689 square kilometers), where 2 million people lived along 40,000 miles (64,300 kilometers) of navigable rivers that make up the Amazon River basin. Getting to know the territory by boat and canoe, the missionary realized the great needs of the population, their poverty, superstitions, and diseases. Steamboat trips were difficult, uncomfortable, and insecure. Nor did they go everywhere, forcing them to travel a lot in rowing canoes. Halliwell felt the need to have his own boat. He also held evangelistic meetings in the cities, such as Belém (1929) and Manaus (1932).

In 1930 the Halliwell couple spent their vacation in the United States, time that Leo took the opportunity to take a course on tropical diseases. They also used that time to visit family members, speak in churches and camp meetings, and raise funds for the project. The Young People's Missionary Volunteer contributed with US$5,400. When returning to Brazil, Leo took with him books about shipbuilding and navigation. He thought of certain characteristics for the boat: small and functional, of low height (to mitigate the effects of storms), and a strong hull and little draft (to navigate in shallow water courses). The boat would be 30 feet in length by 10 feet and half a beam (width), a draft of two and a half feet, the bottom in the form of a VV to achieve greater stability and prevent it from overturning whenever the tide went down. Halliwell himself made the design. Amazon woods were used: itaúba, piquiá, "pau d'arco" for the hull, and cedar for the interior. The work was done by hand during a period of three months. The eight-ton vessel would be powered by a 20-cylinder, 20-horsepower Buda diesel engine. It would travel at 9 knots (10 miles, or 17 kilometers) per hour. The boat had to transport medicines and food for six months of travel. The living room (where the helm was) was turned into a dining room and a bedroom. It had a closet and a refrigerator. There were fixed benches on the side walls for five people each, with drawers underneath. Banks could serve as beds for visitors. The table was removable, and three beds were hung from the ceiling. It had windows throughout the extension, with double curtains made of wood and cloth. Then came the engine room, the cloakroom, the toilet, and the shower. The kitchen had a cabinet and a stove with kerosene. The fuel was transported on the roof: 500 gallons (1,892 liters) of fuel oil in ten drums. Light was available through a gasoline generator. The boat was a house in miniature, as well as clinic, office, pastoral room, and counseling.

The simple opening ceremony of Luzeiro I (Light Bearer) happened on July 4, 1931, christened by Jessie Halliwell with a bottle of guarana. The inaugural journey of Luzeiro I in 1931 took them to Maués, about 900 miles from Belém, countryside of the state of Amazonas, where they held evangelistic meetings. The annual visit of the Halliwell couple to Adventist and interested riverside community was welcomed with joy and enthusiasm. On their itinerary, Luzeiro I stopped by the groups of believers on Saturdays, and the missionaries stayed with them for two or three days. The main diseases to be treated were malaria, wounds and ulcers, intestinal infections, typhus, trachoma, smallpox, cancer, parasites, hookworm, dental problems, skin diseases, and other tropical diseases. Malaria was the leading cause of death and was treated with quinine. Luzeiro carried a guestbook. Normally patients were treated during the day, and meetings were held at night. In these meetings they talked about nutrition, hygiene, family counseling, and biblical teachings. Leo used to request authorization from the civil authorities and the police to carry out these public activities. Halliwell wrote: “As the result of the medical work, we find open doors everywhere in the whole north of Brazil.”

Each year Luzeiro traveled about six months and covered the 1,000 miles (1,600 kilometers) that separated Belém (Pará) from Manaus (Amazonas), navigating a total distance of 10,000 to 12,000 miles (16,000 to 19,300 kilometers). The best time of the year to travel was from February to August, when the river was full and they could get close to each house with the ship, and the trade winds of the Atlantic were not so strong. The boat was repainted white before each trip. The riverside people waved handkerchiefs or white cloths to ask for the boat to stop, and then long lines of patients formed. The work in the rivers and in the Amazon jungle involved dangers that had to be faced head-on. Halliwell also did a pioneering work among the indigenous people of northern Brazil. In 1931 he made contact with the Maués, of the Villa Cinco Quilos. In 1932 he visited the Mundurucus Indians of the Andirá River, in Ponta Alegre. There a school was built in which the teacher Honorino Tavares and his wife, Maria, served for six years.

**North Brazil Union Mission (1936–1954)**

In 1936 the Lower Amazonas Mission turned into the North Brazil Union Mission, which was divided into three missions: (1) Central Amazonas Mission (state of Amazonas and territories of Roraima, Rondonia and Acre), (2) Lower Amazonas Mission (state of Pará, territory of Amapá) and (3) North Coast Mission (states of Ceará, Maranhão, and Piauí). The organization of the North Brazil Union Mission happened on December 8, 1936, with Leo B. Halliwell as the first president. Apparently there were then only 253 members.

The missionaries worked hard and sometimes got sick. After 17 years in the Amazon the Halliwell family got malaria. In 1936 they had vacations (furlough) to visit relatives in the United States. This was the last time Leo saw his parents. Additionally they took special classes at the Faculty of Medicine in Loma Linda, California. The Luzeiro was remodeled and refurbished in 1937. Luzeiro I was followed by Luzeiro II, built in 1941. The first was commanded by the American missionary Frederik C. Pritchard, in the state of Amazonas, and the second was commanded by Halliwell. The Pritchards were American missionary nurses based in Manaus, Amazonas state. A leader of the American Rubber Company in Belém, Pará, donated three motors for boats to Halliwell. Luzeiro III was inaugurated in Belém, on February 19, 1948, commanded by Frederik C. Pritchard. This boat was sailing along the Paranaiba River in the North Coast Mission. Luzeiro IV was built in 1953. These were followed by many others. The North Brazil Union Mission and ADRA Brazil continued...
the boat project with the inauguration of the *Luzeiro XXIX* in the state of Pará on a Saturday, June 25, 2016. *Luzeiro I* remained active for 67 years (1931–1998), and is now restored in the museum of the Amazonia Adventist College.

North Brazil Union Mission carried out important evangelizing campaigns in Halliwell's time. Gustavo S. Storch, who had served as an evangelist since 1940, lectured in all capitals: Belém (Pará), São Luís (Maranhão), Teresina (Piauí), Fortaleza (Ceará), Manaus (Amazonas), and others. The first temple in Belém, with capacity for 300 people, was inaugurated on January 31, 1936. By the time Leo left the presidency there were seven churches organized in Belém.

Halliwell held meetings in the open air many times, such as in Santarém (Pará), Cumatê (Salgado), and then Curuçá (Pará). The light projections were unknown, and so they attracted people. The boat had a generator, and power cables for the projector, screen, and portable organ. Slides were projected on the life of Jesus, and hymns were sung. Gradually many points of preaching and treatment were established on the banks of the rivers.

Jessie recognized one day that they needed to work with the right arm of the message, through a medical institution. That is why the Halliwells began the Belem Clinic in 1942, in a rented place. Later, land was bought in the neighborhood of Marco, Belém. With an offering from the Sabbath School of US$51,000, a two-story building with 45 beds and three houses for doctors and nurses was projected. Belem Hospital was inaugurated in 1953, under the direction of Dr. Elmer Bottsford, followed by Dr. Gunther Ehlers.

### Final Years and Legacy (1955–1967)

In 1955 Halliwell left the presidency of North Brazil Union Mission. The South American Division appointed him supervisor of the activities of the boats throughout the territory, a task that required him to travel extensively. He remained in Belém until 1956, when he moved to Rio de Janeiro.

The reality of the church in the Amazon region changed significantly during the ministry of Leo Halliwell. From ten members it rose to 2,590 members, 20 organized churches, 70 workers among pastors, teachers, and canvassers, 52 Sabbath Schools, 15 church schools, 19 teachers, and four medical missionary boats. It is estimated that the Halliwells treated about 250,000 patients. His humanitarian ministry created social awareness about the importance of public health among the coastal population of the Amazon.

Jessie Roweley Halliwell was more than a missionary’s wife; she was a missionary herself. She had a dynamic and versatile personality; a variety of gifts and abilities. A nurse by vocation, she offered hydrotherapy treatments and healthy cooking courses, as well as offering her attention, affection, encouragement, and faith. An obstetrician nurse, she delivered hundreds of babies. She canvassed and raised funds to help and encourage young people to educate themselves. She made mission visits and gave Bible studies, did evangelization with children, helped the Dorcas Society. There were parents who in her honor named their daughters Jessie. In her last years she continued to send donations from the United States.

Upon their return from Brazil to the United States in the spring of 1958, the Halliwells worked for a year at the Oregon Conference while building their home in Vista, California. The house had ample land, with garden, fruit trees, and orchard. Friends residing in the United States paid tribute to them. They were frequently invited to speak in the churches.

A year later Jessie got cancer. She accepted her disease without complaints. She died at 68 in Vista, California, on September 27, 1962. She left her husband, Leo Halliwell; her son, Jack; her daughter, Marion; eight grandchildren; three sisters (Mable Ogborn, Frances Coleman, and Esther Hultman); and two brothers (Earl Roweley and Lee Rowley). On her grave there is a tombstone with the design of a small mission boat and below the following words: “She fulfilled her mission of love.” Leo stayed at Marion’s house and visited the Amazonia with some friends. He later married Eleanor Bailey. He died at 74 of a heart attack, in Vista, California, on April 19, 1967. He was buried in Tulare Cemetery, California, by Jessie’s side. While in the hospital he often remembered about Brazil. His grave has the words: “He Lived to Serve.” He left two children, eight grandchildren, four sisters, and one brother.

The Halliwells received many awards and medals. On one occasion the American consul in Belém offered them a tribute, to which all Americans based in Belém and other places were invited. His story was known by readers of many parts through the article “Medicine Man on the Amazon” that the magazine *Reader’s Digest* published in 1956, and reprinted in 1959. The Brazilian government, through the Brazilian embassy, gave Leo and Jessie the Southern Cross, a decoration conferred by the president of the republic with congressional approval, for foreigners who presented great benefits to Brazil. Jessie was the first woman to receive it, for her “relevant medical and religious work.” On November 5, 1967, the 180-horsepower *Lake LA 4* amphibious aircraft of the North Brazil Union Mission was named after Leo Halliwell (posthumous tribute). In a solemn session held on September 14, 2015, the Legislative Assembly of the state of Pará presented the honorary title of “Citizen of Pará” to the American pioneer and missionary Leo Halliwell.

The Emergency Care Unit service at Belem Hospital was reopened on November 17, 2014, in tribute to Jessie Roweley Halliwell. A plaque recalls her career as a nurse and a pioneer in the northern region of Brazil. It says that she took care of the sick with much attention and affection, bringing courage and faith in God.

Leo Blair Halliwell is recognized as “apostle of the north” or the “American Schweitzer.”


Hall, Clarence W. “Medicine Man on the Amazon.” Reader’s Digest, October 1956.

Halliwell, Leo B. “An Evening With the South American Division.” ARH, July 19, 1950.


———. “Siete mil kilómetros por el Amazonas” [Seven Thousand Kilometers Through the Amazon]. Revista Adventista [Adventist Review], January 20, 1936.


“In Brief; Atlantic Union.” ARH, October 30, 1958.


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**NOTES**


2. Claris (Jack) Halliwell (1918–2006) studied in Brazil College, Brazil, and in Pacific Union College, California. He graduated in the United States with a degree in communication. He married Audrey Lord (1925–2011), with whom he had three daughters and a son. He served in the U.S. Marines for five and a half years, and was an employee of the federal government. He was a diplomat in Ecuador and Brazil. Between 1971 and 1974 he was consul of the United States in São Paulo, Brazil. He retired in 1974, and died on September 5, 2006, at age 86.


4. The East Brazil Union, established in Niterói, extended from Rio de Janeiro to the extreme north of Brazil.

5. See Arthur S. Valle, “*Halliwell Arrived in Brazil 50 years ago*,” *ARH*, December 27, 1979, 19, 20.

6. Marian Halliwell (1922–2015) graduated as a nurse in Washington Missionary College, near Washington, D.C. She married Dr. Raymond Ermshar (1916–2015), a surgeon, with whom she had two children. The couple worked for several years at Silvestre Adventist Hospital. After retiring, they returned to Brazil and founded Manaus Adventist Clinic in Manaus, Amazon. Marian Halliwell Ermshar settled in Grand Terrace, California, United States. Her daughter has a replica of the *Luzeiros*, *Hope on Board* manufactured by Leo Halliwell himself. She died on January 26, 2015, in Redlands, California.

7. Leo Halliwell, C. C. Schneider, Henrique Stoehr, and Gustavo S. Storch were ordained by Meade McGuire, of the General Conference; and F. W. Spies, president of East Brazil Union.


11. The 20-horsepower diesel engine served for nine years and was replaced by an engine made in the United States.


13. L. B. Halliwell, Light Bearer to the Amazon, 72.


15. The Luzeiro II was built with funds from the Sabbath School offering. The ship measured 36 feet by 12 feet and had a diesel engine, electric cooling, a 32-volt battery, and a generator.


22. The Find a Grave website shows the tombs of Leo and Jessie Halliwell in Tulare Cemetery, California, and offers some different data. It says that Jessie Halliwell was born on February 22, 1894, in Nebraska, and died on September 27, 1962, in Tulare County, California. It also says that Leo Halliwell was born on October 15, 1891, in Ohio, United States, and died on April 18, 1967, in San Diego County, California. Accessed March 9, 2018, https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/44888684/leo-b.-halliwell.


26. Daniel Walter brought the plane to Manaus, Amazonas, and was a pilot for ten years.