

Jeffes, Norman Fisher (1896–1963) and Ivy Linda (Sonter)

ALLEN SONTER

Allen Sonter, Ph.D. (University of New England, New South Wales, Australia). Sonter retired (1994) as the principal and business manager of Pacific Adventist College (now University), Papua New Guinea. An Australian by birth, Dr. Sonter has served the church as teacher, principal, education director and college administrator. In retirement he has managed a development project for the Adventist School and Glenvale Church in Toowoomba. He is married to Margaret MacLennan, with three adult daughters and one son, eight grandchildren and six great-grandchildren.



The Jeffes family, 1930.

Photo courtesy of Allen Sonter.

Norman Jeffes was instrumental in developing Weet-Bix, the famous breakfast biscuit now manufactured and marketed by the Sanitarium Health Food Company. Norman and Ivy Jeffes were involved in many aspects of church activity in Australia, New Zealand and South Africa.

The Australian Years

Norman Fisher Jeffes was born on September 24, 1896 at Enmore, NSW, and died from a stroke in South Africa on December 3, 1963. At the age of eleven years, he joined the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church, his mother having become a member through reading *Signs of the Times*. He attended the Church's Australasian Missionary College (now Avondale College), earning his own college expenses, mainly by selling Adventist books. At College he met Ivy Linda Sonter (whose family were members of the Epping church), and after four years at Avondale, at 22 years of age, he married 21 year old Ivy on June 26, 1918.

In order to provide for a home, and later a family, Norman turned his hand to a number of occupations, including roofing, furniture removal, and management of a confectionery factory. Norman survived a bout of typhoid fever which led to the closure of the confectionery business, and went to work for Cereal Foods. It is believed that it was during this time that Arthur Shannon, a fellow member of the Stanmore SDA church,

involved him, and possibly also two other Stanmore SDA church members, Bennison Osborne and L. Frederick Fooks, in discussions about making a slightly sweetened cereal biscuit to improve on Sanitarium's Granose. Norman was familiar with Granose, having no doubt worked during his college days at the Sanitarium Health Food (SHF) factory at Cooranbong.¹ Sometime in 1922 it appears that Arthur Shannon asked Jeffes to help him produce a biscuit such as had been discussed, but he resisted, as he saw it as competing with the church-owned Sanitarium Health Food Company. However, when Cereal Foods started to produce Vita-Brits, in opposition to Granose in 1923 and Jeffes saw that it was not possible to protect Granose from competition, he agreed to throw in his lot with Shannon and was instrumental in developing Weet-Bix, becoming production manager for Weet-Bix in Sydney when Shannon started Grain Products Limited (GPL) in late 1925 or early 1926²

Because of the impact of Weet-Bix on Granose sales in Australia, SHF negotiated the purchase of GPL from Shannon in the later part of 1928.³ In the meantime, in 1927, Shannon sent Jeffes to establish a Weet-bix factory in Christchurch, New Zealand (NZ). This was so successful that Shannon then asked Jeffes to establish a second factory in Auckland in 1928.⁴ As in Australia, Granose sales declined when Weet-Bix was introduced, so Shannon sold his NZ interests in Weet-Bix and GPL to SHF in 1930, and set his sights on South Africa⁵ Thus, on July 11, 1930 the Jeffes family, consisting now of Norman and Ivy, with their four children, left Sydney harbour aboard the SS Euripides bound for South Africa.

It should be noted here that Norman and Ivy Jeffes were very much committed to their children, Donald, Allan, Loyla and Natalie, and their home was a happy place for the children. Despite his busy work schedule, Norman always made time for his family, and Ivy was a devoted mother.

The South African Years

On arrival in Cape Town, Norman lost no time in setting up a Weet-Bix factory on the corner of Court and Electric Roads, Wynberg. The first Weet-Bix were produced in 1931, and Weet-Bix rapidly became a popular breakfast food in South Africa.⁶ For eighteen years Norman managed the Weet-Bix Company, and then the factory was sold in 1948 to Bokomo, a Farmers' Co-operative.⁷ Norman Jeffes has been called the father of the cereal food industry in Southern Africa. He was known there as "Mr. Weet-Bix."⁸

It is a measure of Jeffes' commitment to the SDA church that when the Weet-Bix business was sold to Bokomo, he made it a term of the sale that any SDA employees were always to be given Sabbath privileges. They were not to be required to work between sunset Friday and sunset Saturday.

After the sale of the Weet-Bix business, Norman and Ivy established and managed a business, called Rand Lines, making high quality hand finished fishing equipment. Clients included even the Prime Minister of South Africa. They were still managing this business at the time of Norman's death, and though Ivy and Allan tried to keep the business going, it proved too much for Ivy, and it was sold soon after.⁹

Church Involvement

Shortly after arrival in South Africa Norman became an elder of the local Claremont church. He was then asked to chair the local Adventist school board, and led out in its development into what is now the Hillcrest Secondary School. Both Norman and Ivy were heavily involved in all aspects of church activity, including welfare, Harvest Ingathering, youth camps, picnics, Christmas hampers, and food parcels during the World War II. Their home was a centre for church social gatherings. Norman frequently preached at Adventist churches around Cape Town, and initiated the practice of making home communion available to house-bound members. He shared his wisdom with the church as a member of the Helderberg College Board for over 25 years, and also as a member of the Cape Conference Executive Committee for almost as long.¹⁰ Allan Jeffes subsequently followed in his father's footsteps as a member of the Helderberg College Board and the Cape Conference Executive Committee. Following an evangelistic program in the area about 1949, Norman formed a small Adventist group in Wynberg, and he and Ivy worked tirelessly to build up this church. At first they met in hired halls, then in the Jeffes' home, until Norman led in the building of the Plumstead church.¹¹ Ivy was involved in many aspects of church activity - Dorcas and welfare work, hosting visiting ministers and missionaries, playing the organ, conducting a choir for an evangelistic mission, leading out in "Missionary Volunteer" meetings, decorating meeting places, arranging social occasions for university students and other youth, and much more.

Home and Family

Norman and Ivy were very much committed to their family. Despite Norman's heavy work schedule, he always made time for his children, and he did everything possible to please Ivy. The family have fond memories of the times they spent together, especially on Friday evenings and days enjoying time on the water, given Norman's love of boats and the sea. The homes where they lived were places of beauty and attraction. The children of Norman and Ivy have distinguished themselves in their service to God and country. Donald specialized in Anaesthesiology in Johannesburg, holding senior University and Provincial appointments, and was elected honorary Life Vice-president of the SA Society of Anaesthesiologists; Allan took over the management of Weet-Bix SA from his father until his death in a work-related motor accident in 1986; Loyla was Assistant Nursing Matron at the Red Cross Children's Hospital in Cape Town, and Natalie taught in SDA schools in Cape Town, Bethel College and Government High Schools in Durban. She holds B.A. and B.Th. degrees, and has also served on the Helderberg College Board and the Cape Conference and Union Committees. Seven grandchildren carry on their grandparents' and parents' legacy.

Civic Activities

Norman Jeffes was involved in the establishment of the Wynberg and Somerset West/Strand Rotary clubs, and was elected as the Rotary International representative for South Africa to attend the Mexican City World Rotary Congress. He also initiated the first Rotary-sponsored Carols by Candlelight, now an annual nation-wide event in South Africa.¹² Ivy was also civic-minded, and besides being involved with Norman in his activities; in her later years after Norman's death, she assisted with Meals-on-Wheels for at least three days per week.

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NOTES

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