

# Troy, Owen Austin, Sr. (1899–1962)

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Chloe O'Neill, a recent graduate from the University of Idaho with a degree in history and religious studies, began her professional career under Dr. Sydney Freeman, Jr. (University of Idaho) and currently works for the National Center for Civil and Human Rights in Atlanta, Georgia. Her research under Freeman and at the National Center for Civil and Human Rights detailed histories of diverse populations, equal opportunity, and community investment. She is an aspiring professor with a focus in equitable development and modern American history.

Owen Troy, Sr., was an influential minister and educator noted for innovation in linking evangelism with social service programs, music, and broadcasting. He was prominent in the development of African American Adventism during the first half of the twentieth century and among the most forthright advocates for equitable race relations in the church.

## Early Life and Education (1899–1922)

Owen Austin Troy, Sr., was born in Los Angeles, California, on November 3, 1899. The Troys were introduced to the Seventh-day Adventist Church in 1906 when Sarah Cain, a member of the Los Angeles Central church, approached Owen's father, Theodore Troy, a local postman, businessman, and community leader, inquiring if he would be willing to host Bible studies at his house. Troy and his wife accepted, and opened their home to classes conducted by Jennie Ireland, a self-supporting Bible instructor and nurse. Along with the Bible class, Ireland taught principles of healthful living and gave practical instruction in cooking and home nursing.

Owen and his parents became part of the Furlong church that grew out of the gatherings in their home. Begun in 1908 with 23 members, it was the first congregation of black believers west of Kansas City, Missouri, to be officially organized as a Seventh-day Adventist church. It included several members who would make prominent contributions both to the development of Adventism among black Americans and to the wider society.<sup>1</sup>

Owen grew up surrounded by this rich faith community. He obtained his high school education at a Seventh-day Adventist school, San Fernando Academy, graduating in 1918. He then took the theological course at Pacific Union College (PUC) in northern California.<sup>2</sup>

## Ministry in Oakland and Chicago (1922–1936)

Owen's graduation from PUC in 1922 was followed by internship in pastoring and evangelism that included service as a tentmaster and music leader, as well as preaching. In 1924 he was assigned to the Bay Area of California, where he developed the Market Street church in Oakland.<sup>3</sup>

That summer Owen A. Troy married Ruby Bontemps, with whom he had grown up in the Furlong church and had long been a counterpart in church endeavors. Ruby's brother, Arna Bontemps, became one of the founders and important leaders in the Harlem Renaissance with other notable writers and intellectuals such as Langston Hughes and James Weldon Johnson. Ruby was a skilled public speaker and had an affinity for music.<sup>4</sup> She served as a librarian and educator, and was prominent in civic affairs, most notably with the Pasadena Women's Interracial Club



Owen Austin Troy.  
Photo courtesy of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Archives.

in California during the 1950s.<sup>5</sup> The Troys' only child, Owen, Jr., was born in 1927.

Throughout his pastoral and evangelistic ministry, Troy developed further the wholistic methods that he had observed from Jennie Ireland in Los Angeles. Health clinics, classes in healthful living, vegetarian cooking, basic nursing skills, and community service initiatives accompanied evangelistic preaching. He also emulated Ireland's Bible instruction methods, insuring that those preparing to join the Adventist Church thoroughly understood and could explain its teachings.<sup>6</sup> Owen also used his exceptional musical talents to enhance his ministry. He was a skilled violinist and choral conductor who made his renowned choirs integral to his evangelistic campaigns.<sup>7</sup>

Calvin Rock, who later became president of Oakwood College and a vice president of the General Conference, recalled being impressed during his early teen years that Troy "was dignified and had the reputation for being a part of the upper crust, socially speaking. He always seemed to be well dressed and well spoken and appeared to run a very clean, organized, and sophisticated kind of operation (church)." Rock added that Troy's work and values served as a model for developing churches and inspired those around him to continue his work. Harold A. Lindsey, for example, pursued this goal in Compton, California.<sup>8</sup> Troy, however, did not, with his high achievements, hold himself aloof from others. "Even though he had brains, he could speak to anyone," according to one contemporary.<sup>9</sup>

In 1931 Troy was called to serve as pastor of the large Shiloh Church in Chicago, Illinois. There he worked with Dr. Harry E. Ford, an X-ray specialist at the nearby Hinsdale Sanitarium, in establishing the Shiloh Health and Educational Clinic in April 1932. The clinic received much public acclaim for its innovative and compassionate provision of health and medical services to Chicago's neediest during the Depression era. By September 1935 the clinic had given medical and dental care to more than 10,000 patients. For this and other facets of its comprehensive program, the Pittsburgh *Courier*, an African American newspaper with a national readership, credited Shiloh, during Troy's pastorate, with giving "a shining example of community service."<sup>10</sup>

Troy continued his education in Chicago, completing a master's degree in religious education from the University of Chicago in 1938.

## Oakwood Years (1937–1939)

Troy was called from Chicago in 1937 to serve as business manager at Oakwood Junior College in Huntsville, Alabama.<sup>11</sup> "When James Moran became the school's first black president, he chose Troy to be the first business manager," according to Mervyn Warren, author of the comprehensive, authorized history of Oakwood.<sup>12</sup>

During his Oakwood years Troy also directed the Alabama Singers, which primarily sang historically African American spirituals and Southern melodies.<sup>13</sup>

## Pasadena and the Pacific Union (1939–1958)

In 1939 Troy and his wife returned to southern California, where Owen became pastor of the Sunset Avenue church in Pasadena. To enhance his evangelistic work, Troy originated the Sweet Chariot Hour radio broadcast in 1942. The program broadcast live from the auditorium of the Sunset Avenue church each Saturday from 6:30 to 7:00 p.m. It featured choral groups singing spirituals and gospel songs, short talks, discussions on current issues, and interviews. Guests ranged widely, with examples including General Conference president J. L. McElhany, and Roland Hayes, the respected African American lyric tenor and composer. Bible study courses were offered through the mail by the Sweet Chariot Hour Correspondence School. Troy reported in 1948 that 34 individuals had been baptized after taking the courses, and the 925 were currently enrolled.<sup>14</sup>

Troy was appointed secretary (director) of the Regional Department of the Pacific Union Conference, with responsibility for oversight and advocacy for the black work throughout the union conference territory. Serving in this capacity for eight years, he was, in the words of a newspaper report, "credited with many advancements affecting the wider opportunities of Negro Adventists."<sup>15</sup> In 1955 he took a different position with the Pacific Union Conference, that of associate Sabbath School director.

While serving at the Pacific Union headquarters, Troy enrolled in doctoral studies in theology at the University of Southern California. He was awarded the Doctorate of Theology degree (Th.D.) with honors in 1952. Troy was not only the first African American to earn a Th.D. from USC, but the first Seventh-day Adventist to earn a doctorate in the discipline of theology.

Troy's dissertation, "The Financial System of the Seventh-day Adventist Church: An Evaluation of the Factors Entering Into the Adoption and Practice of Tithing,"<sup>16</sup> grew out of personal concern over what he had witnessed at Oakwood College regarding lack of sufficient funds to hire ministerial graduates. He focused his study on tithing as a norm for church members and a means for eliminating recurring shortages of funds and providing a stable financial basis for advancing the church's mission. He also explored the practicality of the tithing in the Christian life and the connections between economic, social, and spiritual aspects that it involves. Mervyn Warren observed that "[Troy] was in a category of black Adventist ministers who considered themselves to be the spokespersons for educational advancement in religion."<sup>17</sup>

## Final Years (1958–1962)

After nearly twenty years back in their home state of California, the Troys moved to the East Coast in 1958 when Owen became pastor of the Dupont Park Seventh-day Adventist Church in Washington, D.C. The six hundred-member congregation, previously known as the Ephesus church, was nearing completion of a new \$650,000 church and education complex in Dupont Park, near the southeast border of the District of Columbia.<sup>18</sup>

Troy saw the church through the transition, but in 1959 was called to a new responsibility as associate secretary of the Sabbath School Department of the General Conference.<sup>19</sup> His work at the denomination's world headquarters was cut short when, after a battle with spinal cancer, he passed away at the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland, on January 18, 1962.<sup>20</sup>

Following her husband's death, Ruby Bontemps Troy remained in the Washington, D.C., area serving at the Dupont Park church school until 1966, when she accepted the post of director of admissions at Oakwood College. After earning an M.A. in Counseling and Guidance at Alabama A&M University, she taught sociology, psychology, and marriage and family at Oakwood. She remained in Huntsville until her death in 1987.<sup>21</sup> Owen A. Troy, Jr. (1927–2013), who was in charge of public relations and management of the Book and Bible House for the Northeastern Conference at the time of his father's death, continued a distinguished career in denominational work that included an overseas mission stint in Sierra Leone and several years in the Communication Department of the General Conference.

## Contribution

Owen Troy was “a creative, constructive genius, a man of explicit detail who used his great talents to the honor and glory of God,” wrote Louis B. Reynolds in his comprehensive history of the African American Adventist experience.<sup>22</sup> Troy was a trailblazing evangelist who innovated approaches that are considered progressive even today. His multifaceted initiatives for health, education, and cultural uplift (particularly through music) won high regard from community leaders and drew many to the Adventist message.

Throughout his career Troy was a relentless and passionate advocate for improved racial dynamics, as well as African American leadership in the church. The quality of his personal characteristics contributed to the impact of his efforts. In the words of Reynolds: “Troy was honest, hardworking, unyielding on points of principle, and had a personal integrity that was pure gold.”<sup>23</sup>

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## NOTES

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