

Sparrow, Sarah Ann "Sallie" (Pittaway)

(1871–1941)

GODFREY K. SANG

Godfrey K. Sang is a historical researcher and writer with an interest in Adventist history. He holds a B.A. in History from the University of Eastern Africa Baraton and a number of qualifications from other universities. He is a published author. He is the co-author of the book *On the Wings of a Sparrow: How the Seventh-day Adventist Church Came to Western Kenya*.

Sarah Ann Sparrow, better known as Sallie Sparrow, went to British East Africa in 1911 with her husband David Sparrow, and together they pioneered the Adventist faith among the Nandi people of western Kenya. They planted the first Adventist church in western Kenya and went on to take the faith to many Africans and European settlers in the Eldoret area.¹

Early Life

Sallie was born June 8, 1871, at Rokeby Park in the Eastern Cape to Frederick and Charlotte Pittaway who were pioneer Adventists. She was given the name Sarah Ann, but preferred to be known by the name Sallie.² She was the younger sister of James Pittaway who had married David Sparrow's older sister Harriet. It did not stop there. Frederick Pittaway, James' younger brother married Ruth Sparrow, David's seventh born sister. The small number of Adventists at this time caused many to marry what would be considered as close relatives.

At the age of 18, Sallie accepted the Adventist message about the same time as her parents and was baptized by Elder Charles L. Boyd who was one of the pioneer American missionaries to South Africa.³ She then trained to become a nurse and worked at the Adventist-owned Union College in Claremont in the Cape as a matron. David and Sallie were married at the Rokeby Park Seventh-day Adventist Church in 1892.

Early Missionary Work

Sallie and her husband began missionary work immediately. They moved to work among the Xhosa in the Eastern Cape and she gained fluency in their language. Between 1902 and 1905 she was based at the Maranatha Mission in the Eastern Cape. In 1906 the call came for her family to move to Bulawayo to work at the Solusi Mission. Her brother-in-law, Frederick Sparrow, had been a pioneer missionary at Solusi, having begun the work there in 1895. For a year Sallie Sparrow worked among the Ndebele as a nurse, and while at Bulawayo a daughter named Alvinah was born to them.

The following year, 1907, she returned to work among the Zulu in Natal before again moving to Cape Town in 1908 where she worked for the Cape Colony Conference. It was here that a son was born to them, Herbert Vivian Sparrow. For a while she worked among the Africans in the Cape before moving briefly to Bloemfontein in the Orange River Colony. In 1910 her husband was offered the position of manager of the church-run Sanatorium known as Kimberly Baths, and Sallie worked as a nurse and matron at Kimberly Baths which catered to wealthy clientele from the nearby diamond mines.

Moving to British East Africa

It was while working there that her husband met Dr. Bridgeman, a Cape Town dentist who had purchased land in British East Africa (BEA). He asked David Sparrow to manage it for him. This meant relocating to East Africa and on December 24, 1911, Sallie and David arrived at Mombasa to start the long journey up to Nairobi before moving to Londiani and onward by foot towards Eldoret, 64 miles away. She left her daughter in the care of friends and moved to BEA with her son and husband.⁴

Life in Kenya

They were among the first Europeans in South Africa to move to Kenya, and her writings in the church newspaper, *The South African Missionary*, offers a glimpse of her life in BEA. Life as a pioneer was not easy. She farmed, ran a shop and a bakery, and engaged in various other businesses, each with varying degrees of success. She had to deal with the problems that the pioneers encountered during the Great Depression, spending the entire period in Kenya. She also had to deal with drought, locusts, lack of markets for farm produce, and, of course, the ever-present tropical diseases that took the lives of many pioneers and their animals and destroyed their crops. In spite of it she regularly hosted in her home many pioneer Adventists, both European and African. The pioneer Nandi Adventist Caleb Kipkessio Busienei was initially employed to work in her kitchen before he eventually became a full-time evangelist.

Sallie was not content to just be a housewife, but was a keen farmer in her own right. She once brought seed from South Africa, and in February 1923 her imported seeds were auctioned as unclaimed goods at Kilindini Customs Godown after staying for four months in Mombasa. It is possible that she had run into financial difficulties owing to the Rinderpest outbreak on their farm. The seeds had come up from South Africa aboard the *SS Heemskerk*.⁵ In 1928 she took a job as a nursing matron at the Government European School Eldoret (which became Highlands Girls and is now Moi Girls Eldoret). She served as a matron there for three years.⁶ Her evangelism work distributing Adventist literature among the Europeans eventually led to a church in Eldoret.

Return to South Africa

Towards the end of 1941 David and Sallie Sparrow decided to return to South Africa, leaving behind their son Herbert and his family. Following their farming difficulties and poor prospects in Kenya, coupled with ill health, the Sparrows returned to South Africa where they could get better healthcare. David had undergone two surgeries in 1935 and was quite weak from that. He opted to retire in South Africa with his wife. They agreed that Herbert and his wife Ida and son Derek, would remain to care for their interests in Kenya. David Sparrow resigned his council seat and packed his belongings for Cape Town. They repeated their train journey back to Mombasa, bringing to an end three decades of their life in Kenya. They stayed briefly with their daughter who had become Mrs. Colly and lived at St. James, a suburb of Cape Town overlooking the Indian Ocean. After a little while they found their own place at Westwood, Capri Road, St. James, near Simonstown.⁷

Only months after they settled at Simonstown, Sallie Sparrow took ill and was rushed to False Bay Hospital on the night of December 25, 1941. She spent 12 days in the hospital and died on January 6, 1942. She was 70. A telegram was sent to Kenya informing the members of the church and all who knew her about the death. The *Argus* and *Times* newspapers announced her death. The funeral service was attended by many who knew her, including her large South African family. Elder E. L. Cardey, who conducted the service, described her by saying, "She was truly a mother in Israel, and she has left her mark on the work of God wherever she has lived and labored."⁸ She was cremated thereafter.⁹

Writing in *The Southern African Missionary Outlook* in June 1942, Spencer G. Maxwell said:

We greatly regret to record the passing of Sister David Sparrow. She was one of our pioneer believers on the Plateau. She lived an exemplary Christian life, and her home was the paragon of hospitality. We extend to Brother David Sparrow in South Africa our sincere sympathy in his bereavement.¹⁰

SOURCES

Sang, Godfrey K. and Hosea K. Kili. *On the Wings of a Sparrow: How the Seventh-day Adventist Church Came to Western Kenya*. Nairobi: Gapman Publications Ltd., 2017.

Sarah Ann Sparrow Records. The South African National Archives, Cape Town, South Africa.

Southern African Division Outlook, vol. XL, no. 3, February 15, 1942.

Southern African Division Outlook, vol. XL, no. 10, June 1, 1942.

The South African Missionary, vol. XI, no. 9, March 4, 1912.

NOTES

1. Godfrey K. Sang and Hosea K. Kili, *On the Wings of a Sparrow: How the Seventh-day Adventist Church Came to Western Kenya* (Gapman Publications Ltd., Nairobi, 2017), 7.
2. From her obituary which appeared in the *Southern African Division Outlook*, February 1942.
3. Ibid.
4. *The South African Missionary*, March 4, 1912, vol. XI, no. 9, 4.
5. General Notice No. 1140, December 27, 1922, *The Official Gazette*, Vol. XXIV – No. 861, The Government Printer, Nairobi, 774.
6. From her obituary which appeared in the *Southern African Division Outlook*, February 1942.
7. *Southern African Division Outlook*, vol. XL, no. 3, February 15, 1942, Kenilworth, Cape, 3
8. Ibid. Elder Cardey was quoting Deborah in Judges 5:7 who was describing her courageous rising against the forces of Jabin, King of Hazor.
9. Sarah Ann Sparrow Records at the South African National Archives, Cape Town, South Africa.
10. *Southern African Division Outlook*, vol. XL, no. 10, June 1, 1942, 3.

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