

Van Druten, George Jacob (1851–1932)

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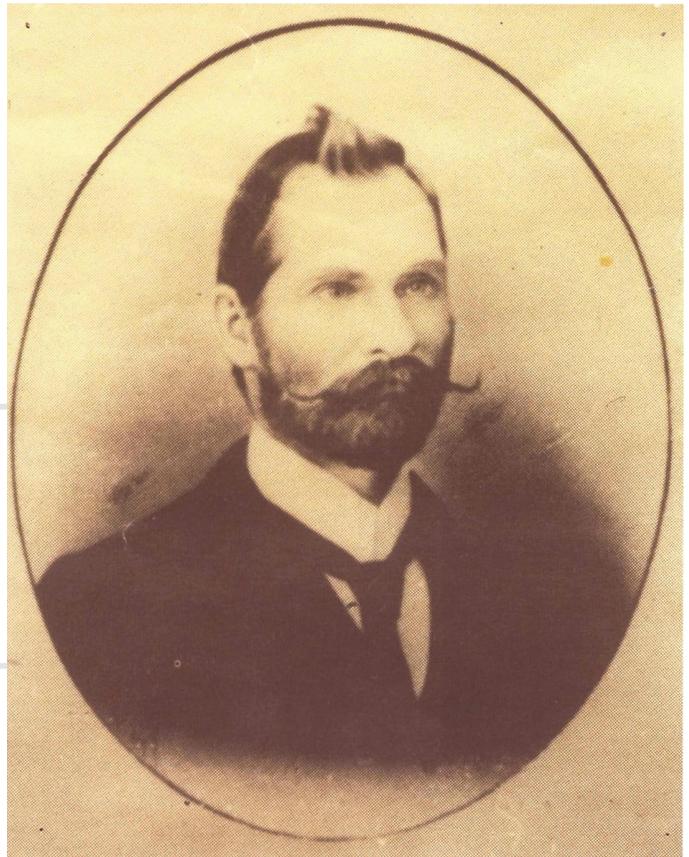
George Jacob Van Druten was one of the first South Africans who came to know about the Seventh-day Adventist Church through William Hunt.

Early Life and Marriage

George Jacob Van Druten was born on November 14, 1851, in Beaufort West, in the Cape Colony.¹ Not much is known about Van Druten's early life in Beaufort West, nor was his wife's name ever recorded. Nevertheless, Mr. and Mrs. Van Druten married in 1870 and thereafter moved to the Kimberley diamond fields "before any buildings were erected. The people still lived in tents in those pioneer days."² Van Druten later established a store in Beaconsfield, a suburb of Kimberley, where the first Seventh-day Adventist Church in Africa was organized later in 1887.

Career

Van Druten became acquainted with the Sabbath truth by divine intervention. While Van Druten lived near Boshof, one of his children took seriously ill. The child's condition warranted no delay, and immediately Van Druten harnessed six mules to a light wagon and loaded his wife and children onto the wagon that Saturday afternoon. Van Druten had to decide whether they should go to a well-renowned doctor in Bloemfontein that was approximately one hundred sixty-five kilometers (102 miles) away or to Kimberley that was nearby:³



George Van Druten

Photo courtesy of Grant Lottering.

Being exceedingly devout, as described by his granddaughter, he knelt and prayed before starting his journey, asking God to guide him and to indicate the way he should go.⁴ Van Druten received more than he asked for in response to his sincere prayer. He had to travel for seven kilometers (five miles) before he had to turn to either Kimberley or Bloemfontein. As he came close to the junction, he saw a traveler on horseback just ahead of him and determined to go in the same direction the stranger would choose. The stranger turned to Bloemfontein, and Van Druten followed. As soon as the stranger turned in Bloemfontein's direction, he disappeared in a way that was difficult to explain as to where he might have gone since the terrain was flat and empty.⁵

At midnight Van Druten stopped and set up camp to stay overnight. Mrs. Van Druten remonstrated insisting that they continue their journey for the ill child's sake. George insisted that they could not continue their journey until Sunday midnight since he did not feel that it was appropriate to travel on the 'Sunday-Sabbath day.' That very night he had a dream in which a man came up to him and asked why he seemed troubled. Van Druten explained that his child was ill, and his wife was angry with him because he would not continue his journey. He insisted that the fourth commandment of God's law required the observance of the Sabbath day. To this, the stranger responded that the Sabbath is on the seventh day of the week, and that Sunday was the first day of the week.

Still dreaming, Van Druten asked his wife for a calendar to ascertain whether Sunday was indeed the first day of the week. When he woke up, he studied the Bible to discover the truth but was left more perplexed than before. They then continued their journey to Bloemfontein despite his uncertainty as to the Sabbath day. When they reached Bloemfontein, he took Mrs. Van Druten and the ill child to the doctor while he went to see the minister from the Dutch Reformed Church of which he was a member to get clarity on the matter. The minister could hardly answer his query, but providently, Van Druten met a Jewish Rabbi and discussed the Sabbath issue with him.

Van Druten then realized that Saturday was indeed the seventh day, and no man could change God's worship day. When he returned to Boshof, he resolved to commemorate God's seventh-day Sabbath. Shortly thereafter, the Van Drutens moved to a semiurban farm in Alexanderfontein. At that time, as already indicated before, Van Druten was a member of the Dutch Reformed Church. Since the ministers of his church could not give him any clear answers regarding the Sabbath, he continued to attend the church although he kept the Sabbath privately. Another member from the same congregation, named Pieter Wessels, also discovered the Sabbath truth by divine intervention. Both Van Druten and Wessels were ardent Bible students, and one day, upon comparing notes, they first realized that both shared the same conviction about the Saturday Sabbath.

One Sabbath afternoon Van Druten invited his wife along with him for a walk. As they walked they passed a stranger who was reading the Bible in his best clothes in front of his shack. Van Druten remarked that the stranger was labeled the laziest man in town since he kept two Sundays a week.⁶ When Mrs. Van Druten turned to get a proper look at the gentleman, she remarked that he instead looked like an old saint. The man was

William Hunt, a gold miner from Nevada, United States, who became a Seventh-day Adventist just before he came to work in the diamond fields in Kimberley.

Van Druten decided to visit him. William Hunt told Van Druten of the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation. Hunt's testimony finally convinced Van Druten that Saturday was in fact the Sabbath day, and Van Druten was delighted to learn of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, which taught and believed this doctrine. He immediately contacted Pieter Wessels and brought him to meet Mr. Hunt.

William Hunt had come to South Africa with as much literature as he could find at that time and continued to receive his subscriptions of the Review and Herald church journal. He shared that literature with Van Druten and Wessels, although they mainly understood Dutch and could not understand the literature in the English language. William Hunt had sympathy for them and encouraged them to write to the General Conference in Battle Creek, Michigan. Hunt wrote the letter while Van Druten dictated what he should write. Together they sent the letter to the General Conference requesting for a Dutch-speaking minister to come to South Africa to instruct them in Seventh-day Adventism and to baptize them. Along with the letter they enclosed £50 for the transport expenses from America to Africa.⁷

This letter was received with great applause at the General Conference Session held in Battle Creek, Michigan, from November 18–December 6, 1886.⁸ Meanwhile, Van Druten and Wessels were no idlers. They began telling their closest family and friends of their new discovered truth so that when the missionaries sent by the General Conference arrived the following year on July 28, 1887, 26 people (including Van Druten) were already waiting for baptism.⁹

Later Life

The Van Drutens continued in the truth and became so attached to William Hunt that they named one of Van Drutens' grandchildren after William Hunt.¹⁰ In 1906 the Van Drutens retired to country living and settled on a farm in "Klipputs" in the Barkley West District.¹¹ Here they lived until George J. Van Druten passed away at 81 years of age on November 25, 1932. Van Druten died suddenly while sitting on his veranda at home without pain, sickness, or warning. He was laid to rest on Sunday, November 27, 1932, with Pastor A. W. Staples officiating at his funeral, which attracted a very large audience. Van Druten was survived by his wife of 62 years, their five sons and four daughters, and his grandchildren.

Contribution

George J. Van Druten is heralded for his devoted life that led him to seek God and the Bible for truth. Upon becoming acquainted with a Seventh-day Adventist, he initiated steps toward bringing missionaries to South Africa who would begin the Adventist work in Africa, once thought to be a dark continent—that is, dark for its lack

of the knowledge of God. Today the church in South Africa boasts more than one hundred forty-five thousand members, a work started by an earnest truth seeking Van Druten and his acquaintances, William Hunt and Pieter Wessels. Of Van Druten's life it was said:

Our brother liberally supported the cause. His was a living fellowship with the Savior [sic]. His earnestness gave him the radiant glow that made him a bright and shining light. Marvelous answers to prayer enriched his Christian experience. From his lonely outpost he watched through the Review and Herald the progress of the message with joy and satisfaction. His faith in the nearness of the Savior's [sic] return was strong. Here was a man who kept his first love through all the years.... Truly our brother rests in the Lord, and his works do follow him.¹²

SOURCES

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NOTES

1. A. W. Staples, "Van Druten," *The Southern African Division Outlook*, January 1, 1933, 8.

2. Ibid.

3. W. A. Spicer, "First Call from South Africa," *ARH*, January 25, 1951, 5.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. Virgil E. Robinson, *Third Angel Over Africa*, Unpublished Manuscript, 5.

7. L. Francois Swanepoel, "The Origin and Early History of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in South Africa, 1886 – 1920" (M. A. Thesis, University of South Africa, 1972), 6.
 8. Ibid., 9.
 9. Ibid., 10-11.
 10. F. C. Pelsler, "Yet Another Van Druten," *Trans-Africa Division Outlook*, April 15, 1969, 4.
 11. Staples, "Van Druten," 8.
 12. Ibid.
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