

Rebok, Denton Edward (1897- 1983)

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Denton E. Rebok “was to Seventh-day Adventist education in China what Dr. Harry W. Miller was to Adventist medicine over there.”¹ This perceptive observation by an unnamed denominational administrator only tells half the story. After spending 23 years in China as a college president and conference administrator, Rebok spent almost an equal amount of time in the United States as a Bible teacher, college and seminary president, and General Conference official. He is also credited with playing a small but significant role in the denomination’s changing position on the nature of Christ.

Early Years

Rebok was born April 7, 1897, in Newburg, Pennsylvania.² In 1909 he, his sister, and his Methodist mother began to attend Bible studies conducted by an Adventist layman. A year later the three of them were baptized into the Seventh-day Adventist Church.³ When he finished high school, he went to the Washington D.C. area to attend Washington Missionary College (WMC).⁴

According to Rebok, before attending WMC his conversion was only intellectual. The heart conversion came when Mead McGuire conducted a Week of Prayer series on Righteousness by Faith.⁵ Denton graduated in 1917 and married Florence Kneeland⁶ (1895-1976)⁷ on May 28, 1917, and took a train to Pennsylvania that very day so



D. E. Rebok

Photo courtesy of the Southern Adventist University archives.

they could say goodbye to Denton's parents, and then they proceeded to the west coast where they took a ship heading to China.⁸

China

Their first assignment in China was to connect with the Swatow Mission Station, where Denton tackled the seemingly hopeless task of learning Chinese.⁹ Despite the difficulty, he did master the language well enough to write at least two books in Chinese.¹⁰

The following year the Reboks were transferred to Hong Kong,¹¹ where Denton was the publishing, home missionary, and young people's secretary for the South China Union Conference.¹² A year later he was given the additional responsibility of education secretary,¹³ supervising at least 100 Seventh-day Adventist schools.¹⁴ In these positions he had the task of introducing new concepts to China and adapting Western ideas to Chinese mindsets. He successfully introduced the idea of female literature evangelists, starting with a few students from the Canton Girls School. He held the first colporteur institute in that part of China and demonstrated it could be self-supporting. He also started the first teachers' institute in the South China Union and introduced the idea of specific examinations in classrooms.¹⁵

As home missionary (lay activities) leader, he discovered that the Chinese disliked the annual Ingathering fundraising campaign because it seemed like begging, and beggars were the lowest-ranked people in Chinese society. He came up with a plan to give something away rather than begging for money. He took a Chinese denominational employee with him and went to the office of an important government official in the area, taking with him a colorful brochure explaining what the Seventh-day Adventist church was doing for the Chinese people. The official said he would like to help with that work and donated US\$200. The Chinese church worker was impressed!¹⁶

Shanghai Missionary College

In 1920 he joined the faculty of Shanghai Missionary College. For the first three years he was assistant principal and taught denominational history, English, and church history. One year he taught mission history instead of English. His wife was also on the faculty, sometimes as an English teacher and sometimes as an accountant. In about 1923 he became the president.¹⁷

Largely motivated by Rebok's "faith in the revealed principles of Christian education,"¹⁸ in 1925 a new campus was built on a rural 125-acre plot of land in Chiao Tou Tseng (Qiaotouzhen) along the Yangtze River and about 30 miles from Nanking. The school then changed its name to China Missionary Junior College. In 1927 it was renamed China Theological Seminary, and then in the 1930s it became China Training Institute.¹⁹

Implementing the work-study aspect of Ellen White's "blueprint" was a challenge in a society in which students, not expected to labor, were dressed in long gowns²⁰ which made physical labor almost impossible. The first step in breaking down this tradition was to invite students to watch the faculty play soccer. As they watched, they were invited to participate. Soon the students were involved, but it wasn't long before they realized that the gowns were a hindrance. Eager to play again the next day, they showed up in pants. Then Rebok tried to ease them into doing manual labor by requiring groups of students to observe various faculty members—including himself—engaging in physical work, including such "degrading" tasks as cleaning toilets, and then asking them to help out. Eventually this led to the development of a profitable industry manufacturing metal bed frames and selling them to other educational institutions.²¹

When the college moved to Chiao Tao Tseng, Rebok was able to add a farm and a poultry business to the school's manufacturing operations.²² The farm was spared when a horde of locusts devoured everything in their path but stopped at the college property line and turned aside.²³

In 1927, when a Chinese Communist army was approaching the campus, Rebok received a message from the manager of Standard Oil in Chinkaing telling him that it would be disastrous if Rebok and his staff didn't evacuate the school immediately. Rebok determined to stay, but sent the women and children away. However, while they were preparing to leave, he received a message from the commander of the United States gunboat *Preble* ordering that Rebok and his staff "must all be on the boat by midnight" that night. They left, but Rebok and three other missionaries were able to return a year later, only to find devastation resulting from large-scale looting. They were able to complete a massive repair project in time for school's opening in September.²⁴

China Division Administrator

Rebok continued to be the president of the school at Chiao Tou Tsengun until the early 1930s,²⁵ when he was asked to be the education and young people's missionary volunteer secretary for the entire China Division,²⁶ a position that required extensive travel over thousands of miles, with much of the territory involved in warfare, under warlords, or controlled by bandits.²⁷

The danger intensified when Japan invaded China. This invasion created a special challenge for Rebok. He knew that many of the young men in Adventist schools and churches would be required to join the Chinese army and that this would be a real problem in view of the Adventist belief that they should not be responsible for taking human life. He secured from Dr. Everett Dick instructions for creating a Chinese Medical Cadet Corps (MCC), and then he approached one of Chang Kai-shek's top aides to explain the plan. The officer examined a document that Rebok prepared for him, then asked, "You mean to say you can train your boys to do medical service in the Chinese army?" Rebok replied that they could on condition that the army respect their convictions against taking life. The officer agreed to the bargain, and Rebok persuaded a former German army officer to undertake the training.²⁸

Rebok had already agreed to conduct summer school for teachers at Chiao Tao Tseng. He did this and also helped out with the Medical Cadet class. The very day the MCC class ended, the Japanese army began moving toward Shanghai. Reuniting with his family in Shanghai seemed impossible. Railroad and steamship service to that city was for the most part suspended, as Japanese bombers were targeting ships and trains. Rebok managed to find his way to Shanghai by overcrowded train, outrageously priced rickshaw, and overpriced taxi. A few days after he arrived in Shanghai, Rebok and the other China Division leaders transferred their operations from Shanghai to Hong Kong.

During his remaining time as an officer of the China Division his travels to carry on his supervisory work and hold committee meetings were extremely dangerous. One of those trips was "frequently interrupted by air raid alarms when the passengers would be ordered to abandon the train and hide in a bamboo grove or ravine."²⁹ When he arrived at Chiao Tao Tseng he found the situation at the campus unsafe. The students had already been sent home, and it was decided that the faculty would also evacuate, although a few of the Chinese faculty members decided to stay behind and try to protect the school.³⁰ Nevertheless, the next time Rebok was able to visit the campus, it had been totally trashed and looted. "They haven't left a thing," he lamented to his companions. Even the trees were gone. Rebok kept thinking, "A dream has ended."³¹

The dream had indeed ended in June 1940 when the Reboks left for furlough in the United States. When the furlough was over, return was impossible.³²

Takoma Park and Collegedale

Back in the United States, Rebok joined the faculty of Washington Missionary College, (now Washington Adventist University) in Takoma Park, Maryland, as assistant professor of theology.³³ Apparently Rebok had engaged in graduate study during furloughs and vacations. By the time he joined the Washington Missionary College faculty he had earned at least one master's degree³⁴ and had completed a five-year language program at the University of Nanking.³⁵ He earned two master's degrees, one at Emmanuel Missionary College (now Andrews University) and the other at Columbia University Teachers College and engaged in doctoral research at Columbia University on "The Transition Between the Ming and Ching Dynasties."³⁶

In 1942 he became president of Southern Junior College (now Southern Adventist University) in Collegedale, Tennessee. Although he served in that position for only one year, his successor as president, Kenneth Wright, said, "His gracious and spiritual leadership made a lasting impression upon the college."³⁷

The following year he was back in Takoma Park, this time as the second president of the recently established Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary.³⁸ He remained in that position until 1951.³⁹ In addition to being president, he also taught practical theology and missions.⁴⁰

During his time at the seminary, he took a small yet significant step in the changing Adventist interpretation of the nature of Christ. In 1949 the Review and Herald Publishing Association, planning to issue a new edition of *Bible Readings for the Home Circle*, asked him to review its text. On page 174 Rebok found something he disagreed with: a statement that in Christ's earthly life He shared "our sinful, fallen nature." He twice deleted the word "sinful."⁴¹

After his seminary presidency Rebok continued to work in Takoma Park, this time as president of the Ellen G White Estate.⁴² His next two positions were also based in Takoma Park: General Conference secretary (1952-1954)⁴³ and General Conference field secretary (1954-1957).⁴⁴ At that time, a General Conference secretary was a single senior executive officer on the third level down, below the president and the general vice presidents.⁴⁵

As a general field secretary in 1956, for example, Rebok was one of 11 distinguished men with that title. They including two former General Conference presidents as well as the denomination's most well-known theological historian.⁴⁶ The General Conference bylaws during this period defined field secretaries as "general field workers elected... to serve in carrying the field responsibilities of the General Conference...under the direction of the General Conference Committee." They were to "be assigned either to field service or to special projects or responsibilities as may be determined by the General Conference Committee."⁴⁷

Some of the tasks undertaken by Rebok as General Conference secretary and as a field secretary included attending and speaking at camp meetings,⁴⁸ holding a Spirit of Prophecy workshop on the campus of Southern Missionary College,⁴⁹ writing for Adventist publications, (primarily for the *Review and Herald*, at least 32 articles, some long and some short),⁵⁰ and preparing a book on the ministry of Ellen G. White.⁵¹ He also traveled overseas to participate in ceremonies connected with the addition of new mission buildings.⁵²

During the 1955 to 1956 school year, although he was officially a General Conference field secretary, the General Conference responded to an emergency by sending Rebok to Collegedale to serve as acting dean of Southern Missionary College (SMC), the same school that he had previously served as president. The emergency arose due to the sudden health-related resignation of SMC president Kenneth Wright. A vacancy had been created when the previous academic dean had been promoted to the presidency.⁵³

La Sierra College

From 1957 to 1961 Rebok taught religion and social science at La Sierra College⁵⁴ near Riverside, California. One of the students in his Bible doctrines class remembered him as a helpful, pleasant, gracious, humble teacher, who suggested resources for students to use in doing their own research on such doctrines as creationism and then write a paper about their findings; but who didn't require them to flounder aimlessly, fruitlessly, without finding answers to their questions.⁵⁵

While teaching at La Sierra he wrote at least two articles for the *Review and Herald*.⁵⁶

Retirement

Rebok retired in 1961⁵⁷ and moved to Carmel-by-the-Sea on California's Monterey Peninsula. In retirement he taught part-time at the private Robert Louis Stevenson School for Boys⁵⁸ and continued to preach, lecture, and write.⁵⁹ He held at least one Spirit of Prophecy workshop at a camp meeting,⁶⁰ and wrote eight articles for the *Review and Herald*, bringing his total number of articles for Adventist publications to at least 76.⁶¹ He also continued writing books, bringing the total to "at least a dozen."⁶²

He and Florence turned over their stocks and bonds to the denomination, receiving in exchange trust and annuity agreements which, he said, would provide adequate support for their "few remaining years." After their passing, he said, the remaining money would be "used to support God's work."⁶³

After Florence died on June 28, 1976, at the age of 81,⁶⁴ Denton remarried.

Denton Rebok passed away December 11, 1983, at the age of 86.⁶⁵ His survivors included his second wife, Marie, his daughter Jean Heinrich, and his son Edward, as well as six grandchildren and six great-grandchildren.⁶⁶

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2. "Obituaries" *ARH*, March 8, 1984, 22.
3. Leroy Edwin Froom, *Movement of Destiny* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1971), 622.
4. Florence Nagel, "Denton Rebok, 1897-1984," accessed February 1, 2022, <https://www.chinesesdahistory.org/denton-rebok>.
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6. Ford, 102-103.
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8. Ford, 103.
9. *Ibid.*, 43-45
10. Froom, 622.
11. Ford, 53.
12. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*, 1919, 155.
13. *Ibid.*, 1920, 172.
14. Ford, 57.
15. *Ibid.*, 54-57.
16. *Ibid.*, 57-58.
17. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*, 1921, 167; 1922, 177; 1923, 201; 1925, 201. The *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* refers to him as "principal" rather than president, but his duties were comparable to that of a college president in his homeland, and at least six of the sources used in this article (Ford, Froom, Nagel, Spalding, Pettibone, and Gardner) refer to him as "president" of this college.
18. Arthur Whitefield Spalding, *Origin and History of Seventh-day Adventists*, volume 4 (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1962), 140.
19. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, 2nd rev. ed., s.v. "China Training Institute;" Ford, 70; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*, 1933, 219.
20. The male "gown" was called *changshan*. "Changshan," accessed March 11, 2022, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Changshan>.

21. Ford, 63- 69.
22. Ibid., 70-76.
23. Ibid., 77-79.
24. Ibid., 81-86. Ford doesn't specifically identify the army as Communist, but he says enough about them to make it obvious that that is exactly what they were, especially if one compares his account with Chinese history of this period.
25. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*, 1926, 226; 1927, 241; 1928, 259; 1929, 269; 1930, 282; 1931, 285.
26. Ibid., 1933, 97.
27. Ford, 90.
28. Ibid., 91-93.
29. Ibid., 101.
30. Ibid., 101-102.
31. Ibid., 108-114.
32. Ibid., 119,126.
33. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*, 1941, 297.
34. Ibid.
35. Ford, 4; Froom, 622, footnote.
36. Ford, loc. cit.; Elva B. Gardner, *Southern Missionary College: A School of His Planning*, revised by J. Mabel Wood. (Collegedale Tennessee: Southern Missionary College Board of Trustees, 1975), 265.
37. Dennis Pettibone, *A Century of Challenge: The Story of Southern College, 1892-1992* (Collegedale, TN: Board of Trustees, Southern College of Seventh-day Adventists, 1992), 125.
38. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*, 1945, 248; Spalding, volume 3, 255; Pettibone, 125.
39. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, 2nd rev. ed., s.v." Andrews University."

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41. Froom, 428; Jean Rudolf Zurcher, *Touched with Our Feelings: A Historical Survey of Adventist Thought on the Human Nature of Christ* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1979), 153-155.
42. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*, 1952, 23; *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Ellen G. White Estate, Incorporated."
43. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, s.v. "General Conference."
44. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*, 1955,10;1956, 10; 1957, 10.
45. *Ibid.*, 1954, 14.
46. *Ibid.*, 1956, 10.
47. *Ibid.*, 1955, 7.
48. Greensburg Daily Tribune, July 7, 1955, accessed February 25, 2022, <https://news.google.com/newspapers?id=5KFWAAAIBAJ&sjid>; D. E. Rebok, "The Alabama-Mississippi Camp Meeting," *ARH*, November 15, 1952, 19; "Carolina Meeting," *ARH*, July 24, 1954, 23; "Ninetieth Annual Camp Meeting in Ohio," *ARH*, July 24, 1954, 24; "The Oklahoma Camp Meeting," *ARH*, September 23, 1954, 20. In 1956 alone he attended nine camp meetings. D. E. Rebok, "The 1956 Camp Meetings in Retrospect," *ARH*, November 15, 1956, 23-24.
49. E. C. Banks, "Spirit of Prophecy Workshop at Southern School," *ARH*, April 9, 1953, 17.
50. Some of his articles are listed here:
<https://jewel.andrews.edu/search~S9/?searchtype=a&searcharg=Rebok%2C+denton&searchscope=2&sortdropdown=t&SORT=D&extended=0&SUBMIT=Search>
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51. Denton E. Rebok, *Believe His Prophets* (Washington: Review and Herald, 1956).
52. D. E. Rebok, "New Administration Building, Malamulo Hospital," *ARH*, April 21, 1955, 32; "A New Church for Lepers in Africa," *ARH*, May 26, 1955, 21, 23.
53. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*, 1956, 10, 238; Pettibone, 212.
54. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*, 1958, 228; 1959, 256; 1960, 243; 1961, 251.
55. Author's recollection. This assessment differs markedly from the bitter account of an ex-Adventist who had attended China Training School in the seventh grade. Gu Chang-Sheng, *Awaken: Memories of a Chinese Historian* (Bloomington Indiana: Author House, 2009), 21, 25-26. That his

memory of Rebok is not typical is suggested by the fact that when the Communist armies moved into the area where the training school was located, a Communist army officer went to see Rebok and promised to try to protect the campus because of the kindness that Rebok had shown him when he was a student there. Ford, 82-83.

56. D. E. Rebok, "Gordon's Choice," *ARH*, January 22, 1959, 14-18; Denton E. Rebok, "Life Sketch of Elder William Henry Bronson," *ARH*, February 9, 1961, 32.
57. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*, 1962, 310: "In Brief," *ARH* July 15, 1926, 24.
58. Ford, 2, 4.
59. *Ibid.*, 4; author's recollection.
60. "Idaho Meeting," *North Pacific Union Gleaner*, May 7, 1973, 19.
61. Those listed in note 50 and, at least, one other: Denton E. Rebok, "The Pew Takes a Look at the Pulpit," *Ministry*, November 1948, 3-4.
62. Ford, 4.
63. Denton E. Rebok, "The One Sure Way to Beat Inflation," *ARH*, December 27, 1979, 6.
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