

Avondale Cemetery Trust, South Pacific Division

LESTER DEVINE

Originally trained as a secondary history teacher, a career long Adventist educator, Lester Devine, Ed.D., has taught at elementary, secondary and higher education levels and spent more than three decades in elected educational leadership positions in two divisions of the world Church, NAD (1969-1982) and SPD (1982-2005). He completed his forty years of denominational service with a term as director of the Ellen G. White/Adventist Research Centre at Avondale University College in Australia where his life-long hobby of learning and presenting on Adventist heritage issues became his vocation.

Since 1898 many Seventh-day Adventists have been buried in the Avondale Memorial Cemetery located on the Avondale Estate, Cooranbong, New South Wales.

In the early colonial history of the state of New South Wales, Australia, it was customary for each denomination to have its own burial ground, typically adjacent to a church. Thus, it was not to be unexpected that with the establishment of Avondale College in 1897, the early Seventh-day Adventists in the community felt they needed to have their own cemetery. While there is no documentation of the original gift of an acre of land by the college for a cemetery, the first burial took place in June 1898 when E. R. Tucker was laid to rest.¹ The second person buried there was William Sumpter, who had come down from Queensland for treatment at the Summer Hill Sanitarium and later moved to Cooranbong, where he died in December 1898.²

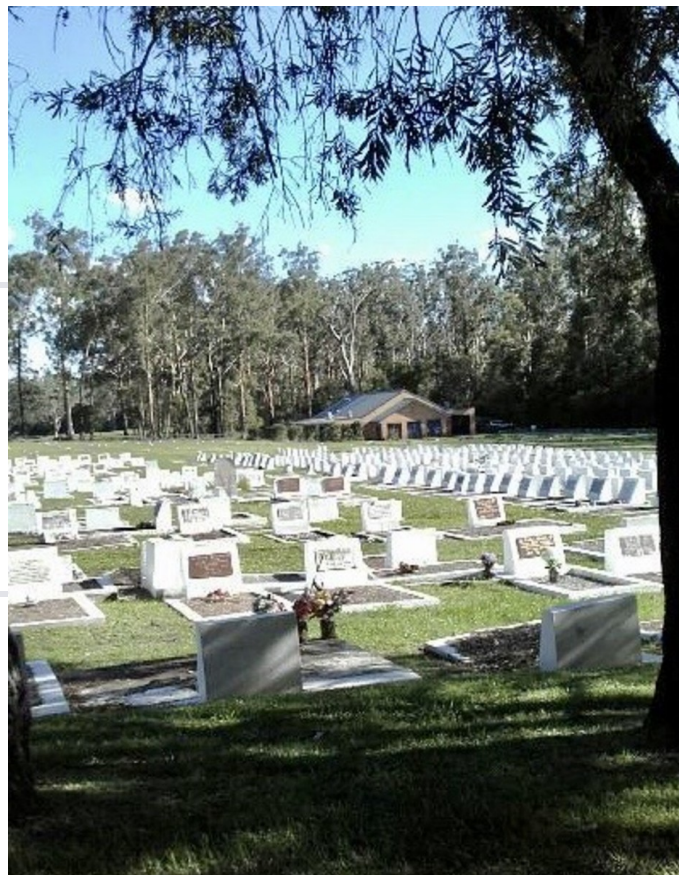
Three persons were buried there in 1899, including Elsie Gates. Elsie was with Sarah Peck and Ella Boyd, returning from a visit to Ellen White's home, "Sunnyside," along "Girls Walk" when the horse balked and backed itself and the gig into Dora Creek. Sarah Peck and Ella Boyd were able to escape, but Elsie Gates was trapped and drowned. Fred Reekie, the farm manager, was quickly on the scene but unable to rescue Elsie and had to convey the sad news to her brother, Pastor E. H. Gates, when he later arrived on campus.³ Another person buried at Avondale some years later was Rhae Allbon. Her tombstone is simply inscribed, "Rhae," and when the question was raised as to why no further information was provided, the answer was that she was so well known it was unnecessary!⁴

The early gravediggers worked at night after their regular employment for the day was over, and during the cemetery's first decade, there were only a handful of burials. From about 1990, the cemetery has averaged about 50 burials annually. Some have wondered why the cemetery was not located closer to the college central campus. The answer is twofold: the cemetery site is close to the almost adjacent Memorial church, and also, between it and the main college campus, there is a significant belt of sandstone too close to the surface to allow use of that land for burial purposes.

From the very beginning, the cemetery has employed its own undertaker (mortician), always a Seventh-day Adventist. One of the best remembered of these was G. F. Bohringer, who held the position for about twenty years⁵ He was then followed by G. M. Radley, before his son, E. G. Radley, held the post for more than 35 years.

The district churches initially funded the establishment of the cemetery and, for many years, subsidized its operation until it became self-supporting. The cemetery finances were mostly managed by the undertaker until the Cemetery Trust was finalized, at which point the Sanitarium Health Food Company office took over the accounting, and later, the college administered it. Eventually, the North New South Wales Conference became responsible for managing the cemetery operation.⁶

During the 1940s the cemetery's operations were formalized, and a constitution for an Avondale Cemetery Trust was drafted and accepted by the three Adventist churches then in the district: College, Dora Creek, and Memorial. The constitution made provision for any future churches established within a 15-kilometer (9-mile) radius to have a part,



Avondale Memorial Cemetery
Photo courtesy of Adventist Heritage Centre, Australia.

and thus several more churches now have an interest in the operation of the cemetery and provide members for its board of management. The purpose of the trust as envisioned by G. F. Bohringer was not only to care for the final needs of church members but also to keep the cost down to a minimum and properly care for the grounds.⁷ Another intention of the trust was to put the cemetery in a self-supporting financial position so that the local churches no longer had to subsidize its operation. This new program worked well. The constitution was amended and updated in 1959 and also 1971 to reflect changing needs.⁸

For many years, a group of Newcastle undertakers, all members of the Funeral Directors Association, were unhappy that they were not permitted to bury in the Avondale Cemetery. Their main objection was that the undertaker at Avondale was not a member of their association, and they attempted to close the cemetery. The reality is that with their fees, any funerals they conducted would have been much more expensive. At this point, the Avondale Cemetery Trust secretary proposed that a hearse be purchased and that the Avondale undertaker be available for cheaper funerals wherever needed, and the critics quickly backed off. Later efforts were again made to close the cemetery including, for a time, blacklisting Oaklands Manufacturing, an industry on the Avondale College property that made caskets and coffins for the Avondale Cemetery and other organizations in the funeral industry.⁹

In 1983 the local government authority (Lake Macquarie Shire Council) classified the cemetery as a conservation area, noting that “the uniformity of this site distinguish [sic] it from other modern cemeteries. It provides comprehensive documentation of the development of the Seventh-day Adventist Centre in Cooranbong, their headquarters in N.S.W. and major settlement in Australia, from 1897 to the present.” Elsewhere in the same conservation document, it is noted, “The cemetery is immaculately maintained. Apparently there is no religious symbolism which explains this treatment, only that of ‘caring & respect for our dead’ (as one seventh-day Adventist explained it.”¹⁰

In recent decades, the prohibition of outside undertakers operating at Avondale has been respected, and there has been a good working relationship with the funeral industry generally. Over the decades, additional land has been provided on several occasions as the cemetery has expanded, and it has been estimated that there is sufficient capacity to continue to provide funeral services, at the present rate of usage, with the existing land allocation, past the year 2030. Also notable is that it is the only cemetery in Australia permitted to conduct funerals on Sundays.

SOURCES

“Adventist Community Announcement.” Unpublished document, n.d. Held in the files of the Avondale Cemetery Trust, Cooranbong, New South Wales, Australia.

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“George A. Irwin obituary.” *Union Conference Record*, May 1, 1902.

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NOTES

1. Wendy Pietz, “Avondale Cemetery,” *Sev-Ad News*, July 2000, 1.?

2. *Ibid.*?

3. *Ibid.*; see also “George A. Irwin obituary,” *Union Conference Record*, May 1, 1902, 15.?

4. C. V. Bell, “Miss Rhea Allbon,” *Australasian Record*, March 7, 1927, 6.?

5. E. E. White, “Life Sketch of Brother G. F. Bohringer,” *Australasian Record*, September 1, 1958, 14–15.?

6. W. John Stafford, “Brief History of the Avondale SDA Cemetery” (unpublished document, December 1994), held in the files of the Avondale

Cemetery Trust, Cooranbong, New South Wales, Australia.?

7. "Adventist Community Announcement" (unpublished document, n.d.), held in the files of the Avondale Cemetery Trust, Cooranbong, New South Wales, Australia.?
8. "Avondale Cemetery Constitution" (unpublished document, 1959), held in the files of the Avondale Cemetery Trust, Cooranbong, New South Wales, Australia; see also "Avondale Cemetery Constitution" (unpublished document, 1971), held in the files of the Avondale Cemetery Trust, Cooranbong, New South Wales, Australia.?
9. Ibid.?
10. P. C. James to W. J. Stafford, July 28, 1983, letter held in the files of the Avondale Cemetery Trust, Cooranbong, New South Wales, Australia.?

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