



Lewis and Ella Finster.
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Finster, Lewis V. (1873–1979) and Ella L. (Blodgett) (1875–1954)

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Milton Hook, Ed.D. (Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, the United States). Hook retired in 1997 as a minister in the Greater Sydney Conference, Australia. An Australian by birth Hook has served the Church as a teacher at the elementary, academy and college levels, a missionary in Papua New Guinea, and as a local church pastor. In retirement he is a conjoint senior lecturer at Avondale College of Higher Education. He has authored *Flames Over Battle Creek*, *Avondale: Experiment on the Dora*, *Desmond Ford: Reformist Theologian*, *Gospel Revivalist* the *Seventh-day Adventist Heritage Series*, and many magazine articles. He is married to Noeleen and has two sons and three grandchildren.

Lewis and Ella Finster served the Seventh-day Adventist church in Australia, the Philippines, Malaysia, the Far East, and the Inter-American division of the Seventh-day Adventists in various capacities.

Early Life

Lewis Finster was born on October 12, 1873 in O'Brien County, Iowa. His father founded the small farming community of Hartley. Lewis received all of his elementary and high school education in the village school. At twelve years of age he was baptized a Seventh-day Adventist at the same time as his mother. When he completed high school he canvassed *From Eden to Eden* by J. H. Waggoner in his locality in order to support himself because his father had passed away. In 1891 he and his mother moved to College View, Nebraska, so that Lewis could easily access Union College classes while living at home. He continued to canvass books during the summers and worked as the college custodian during the semesters, graduating from ministerial studies in mid-1897.¹

The Start of Denominational Service

Immediately after graduation Finster joined the Nebraska Conference, assisting in various public crusades, including one at Grand Island² and another at Morrillville.³ In 1899 he married Ella L. Blodgett (b. July 29, 1875), a Nebraskan lady who had taught public school for several years to enable her to attend Union College.⁴

In mid-1900 Lewis and Ella were transferred to southern Wyoming where much of his time was spent canvassing *Christ's Object Lessons* by Ellen G. White as part of the campaign to alleviate debt carried by the denomination's schools. Lewis reported at the April 1901 General Conference Session in Battle Creek, Michigan, that he sold approximately four hundred copies.⁵

Australia

At that same 1901 General Conference Session, Finster was appointed to the Australasian Union Conference. The Finsters arrived in Australia in time for the Union Conference Session held in July 1901 at Cooranbong, New South Wales. Finster was nominated a delegate-at-large⁶ and during the course of the meetings was appointed to work in Western Australia.⁷ They sailed on the *SS Coolgardie* from Melbourne on August 20, 1901.⁸

The Church in Western Australia was in its infancy when Finster first arrived. He began his work by assisting Elder Jesse Pallant in the Cookernup area in the south-west.⁹ It was not until the following year, 1902, that the West Australian Conference was formed. He was a member of the first executive committee and Ella was elected to be the first Sabbath School secretary.¹⁰ He was called on to use his experience of selling *Christ's Object Lessons* in Wyoming to tutor a small band of members in Western Australia to canvass the same book, proceeds going toward the Avondale School for Christian Workers. His team sold over one thousand copies. He also conducted a tent crusade at York.¹¹

At the first annual session of the West Australian Conference (1903) Finster was elected as vice-president. Ella accepted the role of Sabbath School secretary again in addition to serving as conference treasurer. At the same meeting, held at the Perth camp meeting, October 8 through 19, Finster was ordained by Elder Eugene Farnsworth.¹² The following year, 1904, he was elected president of the Conference and Ella was re-elected to her portfolios.¹³ They continued in these responsibilities until mid-1907, Ella adding a further duty, the education department, in 1906.¹⁴ It was during their term of office that the Finsters began the establishment of the Darling Range School. Lewis also negotiated with the government to donate some land on which the first Perth SDA Church was built in 1910. Before he left Western Australia he reported the existence of fifteen SDA churches, with a total baptized membership of nearly four hundred.¹⁵ Among the churches he organized were Fremantle,¹⁶ Heidelberg (later Bickley),¹⁷ Kalamunda, and Mooliabeenee.¹⁸

Lewis was appointed in 1907 to transfer to Tasmania, another conference in its infancy.¹⁹ On his arrival in Hobart, he was elected president of the Conference.²⁰ He was the only ordained SDA minister on the island.²¹ His term of office only lasted twelve months before he received an appointment to replace fellow Americans, James and Cora McElhany, in the Philippines, a Southeast Asian region in the Australasian Union Conference at the time.²²

The Philippines

When Finster landed in Manila on December 17, 1908, he once again found himself in a pioneering situation. There were no Philippino Adventists and no SDA missionaries to assist him. He set about learning the Tagalog language, his tutor being Sofronio Calderon, the translator for the American Bible Society. Finster engaged Calderon to translate some tracts.²³ When Calderon read the tract about the SDA view of the Sabbath he became a convert and was among the first to be baptized in 1911. The first church, a group of twenty-four, was organized at the same time in Santa Ana, suburban Manila.²⁴

Finster had remarkable success in the Philippines. He built a team of young converts into colporteurs and village evangelists. Other missionaries from America joined him. He is on record as having baptized 104 individuals in one hour.²⁵ The number of churches and the membership grew exponentially, requiring frequent reorganization. In 1914 the Panayan and Cebuan Missions were formed, followed by the Central Southern Luzon Conference in 1916 of which Finster was elected president and his wife served as Sabbath School secretary.²⁶ In 1917 the Philippine Union Conference was formed. The Northern Luzon Mission was organized in the same year. Finster was also instrumental

in establishing Philippine Academy, opening on June 12, 1917.²⁷ This co-educational missionary training institution in Manila grew into Philippine Union College and, later, the Adventist University of the Philippines.

In 1919 Finster relinquished the Union presidency and returned to the office of the presidency for the Central Southern Luzon Conference, the largest conference in the Philippines. He retained that position until 1922.²⁸

Malaysia and the Far East

In 1922 Finster was appointed president of the Malaysian Union Conference, consisting of eight separate missions then named Singapore, Malay States, Batakland, North Sumatra, South Sumatra, East Java, British North Borneo, and Siam. The administration of these territories required extensive traveling from his headquarters in Singapore. He was also an ex-officio member of the Far Eastern Division Executive Committee, Shanghai.²⁹ After six years he transferred to Shanghai in order to serve as the Home Missionary Department secretary for the Far Eastern Division.³⁰

Inter-American Division

Finster was appointed in 1931 as secretary of the Home Missionary and Field Missionary Departments for the Inter-American Division, with offices in Balboa, Canal Zone.³¹ Having gained in the Philippines a working knowledge of the Spanish language he was suited for the task.

In 1936, Finster was appointed superintendent and Home Missions secretary of the Colombia-Venezuela Union Mission with headquarters at Medellin, Colombia. His wife acted as Education and Young People's Missionary Volunteers secretary. The Finsters immediately established a training school, as they had done in Western Australia and the Philippines. Situated in Medellin, the institution was named Colegio Industrial Coloveno, otherwise known as the Colombia-Venezuela Union Training School.³²

Semi-retirement

After forty years of overseas service the Finsters returned to America in 1941 and settled at Tacoma Park, Washington, D.C. For a decade Lewis assisted with pastoral work in the nearby West Virginia, Chesapeake, and Potomac Conferences.³³

Full Retirement

Seeking a better climate for Ella's declining health, they moved to Riverside, California in 1951. Lewis continued to prepare individuals for baptism. He also purchased an avocado ranch at Rincon Springs in the Pauma Valley toward the Mexican border. Every week he motored south to care for the property.³⁴ Ella passed away on September 11, 1954.³⁵ On November 4, 1956, Lewis married Lillian Pasher of Riverside. Together they operated the avocado ranch until 1964.³⁶ Lewis passed away on December 21, 1979, aged 106.³⁷ The General Conference voted a special message of condolence to Lillian on the death of Elder Finster.³⁸

Retrospect

Lewis and Ella had no children. Their lives were devoted wholly to the progress of the Church. Lewis excelled in book salesmanship and administration. The educational institutions established in Western Australia, the Philippines, and Colombia stand as monuments to his vision for young people to be appropriately trained according to their spiritual gifts.

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