



Jerald and Rose Christensen.

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Christensen, Jerald Elvin (1914–2011) and Rose Madonna (Merth) (1915–1989)

MILTON HOOK

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.

Jerald Christensen served approximately forty years as a missionary in China, a tenure marked by seemingly endless war conditions for the first decade but then emerging safely to minister for years in the relative peace of

Taiwan.

Early Years

Jerald Elvin Christensen (otherwise Kristenson or Christenson) (pinyin Gāo Zhé rú) was born on January 30, 1914, to Jens and Marie (Larson) Christensen at Colome, Tripp County, southeastern South Dakota.¹ The family was of Danish heritage. His father was a farmer and carpenter whose search for work took the family to places such as Pennington County in southwestern South Dakota² and Bennett County on the southern border of South Dakota. Jerald was the second of six sons, his siblings being Ernest (b. 1913), Paul (b. 1916), Lloyd (b. 1920), Leonard (b. 1925) and Milton (b. 1926). The 1930 United States Census lists teenagers Ernest and Jerald at home in South Dakota, working as carpenters like their father.³

Jerald crossed the Rockies to attend Laurelwood Academy at Gaston, Oregon, graduating as valedictorian of his class. He then attended Walla Walla College, Washington State,⁴ and during five consecutive summers, 1934 through 1938, sold denominational books to earn his tuition fees. The first summers he worked in Oregon,⁵ at times selling *Bible Readings*.⁶ Then he went to Alaska for three summers, offering *Great Controversy*,⁷ *Home Physician*⁸ and *Beacon Lights*.⁹ None of the volumes were easy to sell. He toiled among the southeast islands of Alaska and in the mining camps and Eskimo villages along the Yukon River. After completion of his college studies, he married Rose Madonna Merth in June 1939, and on July 10 they sailed from San Francisco under appointment to China.¹⁰

Mission Service

The couple first spent twelve months learning the Chinese language. They located at the Shanghai Sanitarium which conducted such classes for all incoming missionaries.¹¹ It was the only year of serenity that they would experience in mainland China. Jerald was to start his work as publishing department secretary for the Central China Union Mission with headquarters in Hankow (now Wuhan), Hubei Province.¹² However, Japanese forces had captured that city, so leaders made contingency plans for him to supervise literature evangelists from further south at Changsha in Hunan Province. The trip from Shanghai to Changsha by riverboat and truck proved to be a nightmare. Their boat had to run a wartime blockade. Although fired at twice, the bullets missed them. They survived air raids at stopovers. One night a typhoon swept in and drenched most of their luggage, including a sewing machine, folding organ, and supplies of books and tracts. Two members of the team took those goods that escaped the soaking on ahead. Jerald and Rose were among those who lingered to lay everything out in the sun to dry for a week before they continued on to Changsha.¹³

Conditions did not improve. In August 1941 Jerald and Rose went a little further south to Hengyang to wait for the birth of their first child. At the same time, he was to pick up boxes of book for his colporteurs. While they were there, the Japanese repeatedly bombed the city and surrounding towns. Each time the bombers circled

away, Jerald and an assistant dashed to unload a few more boxes and store them in a safe place. Then they turned their attention to dressing the wounds of the injured.¹⁴ Little Ruth Marie was born on August 9, and two days later, when mother and infant were thought fit enough to travel, the family fled the city and sought safety in the mountains.¹⁵

Jerald remained at Changsha during the Second World War, officially holding his publishing department portfolio though in reality literature evangelism had dwindled due to few book supplies. Instead, in 1942 he became acting-director of the Hunan Mission¹⁶ and the following year officially the director. He received ordination about the same time.¹⁷

The Christensen family enjoyed a furlough in 1946/1947, returning aboard the S.S. *General Meigs* in November 1947.¹⁸ Church leadership appointed Jerald director of the Honan (Henan) Mission with headquarters at Yancheng where a mission hospital and middle school operated.¹⁹ Communist forces were pressing closer to Yancheng at the time, creating a dangerous situation. Jerald immediately went to Yancheng, sent the students to their homes, and directed most of the mission and hospital staff to safety. When the communists arrived, they set fire to the hospital, volunteers saving the thirty patients before it was totally destroyed.²⁰

Circumstances remained perilous in Honan, so Jerald offered to transfer south to Yunnan Province and do evangelism in the Mokiang District.²¹ He and his family were only there for a month before the communist forces began their battle for the province. As it became too stressful for Rose, evacuation became the only option. Stretcher bearers carried her for 12 days over mountain trails to Kunming Hospital,²² and from there the family went by aircraft to Hong Kong and by the S.S. *American Mail* to the United States in July 1949.²³

Interlude in America

Rose made a full recovery back in the homeland.²⁴ Early in 1950 Jerald began distributing literature among the Chinese in San Francisco and within a few months the Central California Conference appointed him to minister to a core group of Chinese believers. It wasn't long before he organized a church for them, the first Chinese Seventh-day Adventist church in the United States.²⁵

Back to the Orient

In 1953 Jerald received a call to Taiwan.²⁶ It was the beginning of more than three decades of service among the Taiwanese, some years as a volunteer. After directing the Bible Correspondence School located in Taiwan 1960 through 1963,²⁷ he became president of the South Taiwan Mission, 1963 through 1969,²⁸ and president of the Taiwan Mountain Mission (renamed Tai An Mission), 1969 through 1975.²⁹ Then he served as business manager of the Taiwan Adventist College (TAC), 1975 until his retirement in 1979.³⁰ During this period in Taiwan, in 1964 the couple adopted a son, Alvin Bob, into their family.³¹

Retirement of Sorts

The couple found retirement in the isolated community of Marrowstone Island, Washington State. A number of their close relatives lived in close proximity. Rose passed away on June 18, 1989, and was laid to rest in the Mount Hope Cemetery, College Place, Washington State. She was survived by Jerald, their two daughters, Ruth and Helen, and adopted son, Bob.³²

The emotional attachment to the Chinese people attracted Jerald back to Taiwan in 1990. As a 76-year-old volunteer, he resumed work at TAC. The following year he married Phyllis (Davis) Edwards, daughter of Australian missionary to China, Clarence Henry Davis. Jerald and Phyllis continued as volunteers at TAC for a few years before returning to America.³³

At age 96 Jerod died in Shingletown, northern California, on January 13, 2011. Provision had been made for him to be interred alongside Rose, but those plans changed so that his ashes could be taken back to Taiwan. His remains rest at Duona in the southern mountains of Taiwan.³⁴

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