

# Becker, Vernon W.

## (1908-1989)

### 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.



Vernon W. Becker

From *Southern Tidings*, March 1989.

Vernon W. Becker, pastor and educator, devoted the majority of his career to leading local and union conference departments for education and youth ministry.

## Early Years

Vernon's parents, Jacob and Marie Weber Becker, were of Russian heritage. He was the youngest in his family, born on September 24, 1908, in LeHigh, Kansas. His older siblings were Jacob (b. 1900, died in infancy) and sister Vivian Arvy (b. 1905). Jacob Becker, who died prematurely in 1919, was a merchant who had taken his family from place to place in the course of trading. Vernon's elementary education thus occurred at four different locales in Oklahoma: Inola, Shattuck, Tulsa and Oklahoma City.<sup>1</sup>

His first three years of high school were at Jaroso Academy, located in a rural community located along the Colorado-New Mexico border to the east of the Rio Grande River. This 12-grade school was established in the mid-1910s after approximately 30 Seventh-day Adventist families settled in Jaroso but lasted only about ten years.<sup>2</sup> Elder M. Leslie Rice, president of the Colorado Conference, baptized Vernon at Jaroso in 1923. After a year at Champion Academy, Loveland, Colorado, Vernon proceeded to Southwestern Junior College in Keene, Texas, where he completed the theological course in 1929.<sup>3</sup>

## Early Ministry

Becker then began his ministry in the North Texas Conference, assigned to Waco for a year of internship. He then went to Union College in Lincoln, Nebraska, to complete a bachelor's degree, graduating in 1932. Returning to Texas, Becker taught church school in the small town of Salmon but also conducted Sunday night evangelistic meetings in nearby Elkhart during a portion of the school year.<sup>4</sup> The following year he taught church school in Houston, Texas.

In the summer of 1934 the Southwestern Union Conference sponsored Becker to attend the first Advanced Bible School (a precursor to the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary), held on the campus of Pacific Union College in California.<sup>5</sup> He was ordained on August 10, 1935,<sup>6</sup> at the Texas Conference camp meeting by William H. Branson, Joseph F. Westphal and George F. Eichman.<sup>7</sup> Ten days later, on the evening of August 20, Vernon married Evelyn Hortence Plemons in Dalworth Park, suburban Dallas, Texas.<sup>8</sup> They had one child, Ronald, born in 1940.

## Youth and Education Department Administration

From 1935 to 1937 Becker served as pastor of the Houston church and was involved in establishing new churches at Goose Creek and Tyler.<sup>9</sup> In 1937 he was elected to the double role of secretary (director) of the Young People's Missionary Volunteer and Education departments in the Texas Conference.<sup>10</sup> It proved to be the milestone in Becker's career, transitioning from pastoral ministry into leadership among the church youth, both in formal education and Missionary Volunteer activities.

The Greater New York Conference called Becker to departmental leadership similar to his role in Texas, adding the Home Commission (family life) and Sabbath School portfolios. The three years in America's east were followed by a return to Campion Academy, accepting a call to serve as principal placed by G. F. Eichman, his former conference president in Texas and now Colorado Conference president. Becker served at Campion for seven years.<sup>11</sup>

In 1951 he was called to head the Education, Young People's Missionary Volunteer, and War Services departments in the Northern Union Conference. The remainder of his career would be devoted to administration of departments for educational and youth work at the union conference level. While at the Northern Union he completed a master's degree in school administration in 1952.<sup>12</sup> His responsibilities included oversight of four academies: Maplewood Academy in Minnesota, Oak Park Academy in Iowa, Plainview Academy in South Dakota and Sheyenne River Academy in North Dakota. An innovation, rare for its time, was a pre-school entity he called the Tiny Tot Motel Kindergarten, associated with the elementary school in St. Paul, Minnesota.<sup>13</sup>

Becker held the same portfolios for the Atlantic Union Conference, 1955 through 1961. In 1961 he transferred to the Southern Union Conference with a headquarters office in Decatur, Georgia. Here, he devoted full-time to a single department, serving as director of education until his retirement in 1976. In 1971 he was granted a

Citation of Excellence, the highest award for educational service bestowed by the Seventh-day Adventist Church.<sup>14</sup>

## Final Years

The Beckers remained in Decatur, Georgia, for their retirement years. Vernon served as a board member of his local church school. In 1981 the institution was named Becker Adventist School to honor the significant part he had played at the helm of Seventh-day Adventist education, especially in the Southern Union Conference over a span of 15 years.<sup>15</sup>

At three score years and twenty Vernon Becker died of cancer in Decatur on February 16, 1989, and was laid to rest in nearby Floral Hills Memory Gardens at Tucker.<sup>16</sup> His wife, Evelyn continued to live in Georgia. She passed away on December 19, 2005, at the age of 94, and rests alongside her husband.<sup>17</sup>

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## NOTES

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