



Willard Donald and Ruby Jemson.

Photo courtesy of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Archives.

Jemson, Willard Donald “Dean” (1910–2010)

NICOLI R. RIVERA, AND JEECSON MARINAS

Nicoli Rivera, B.A. in theology (Mountain View College, Valencia City, Bukidnon) is the youngest of the four children of Pastor Ultimino Rivera Jr and Rachel Rivera. In 2017 he worked as a youth pastor in Jimenez for one year. Currently, he is a student at the Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies (AIAS), studying for a Master of Religion degree with a major in New Testament, which he is expected to finish in 2021.

Jeecon Marinas

Willard “Dean” Jemson was a leader in Adventist publishing in the North American Division and the Far Eastern Division.

Early Life

Willard Donald “Dean” Jemson was the only child of Andrew and Sarah Olive Jane (McNee) Jemson. He was born on April 4, 1910, in Nanaimo, British Columbia, Canada, and his nationality is Canadian. His father was English, and his mother was Canadian.¹ Andrew Jemson was a mining engineer, and Sarah was a schoolteacher.² During Willard’s childhood, his mother spent several years as the Sabbath School secretary of the British Columbia Conference. For his first 18 years, he lived with his parents at 719 Fitzwilliam, Nanaimo, British Columbia, and attended Canadian Junior College. In 1920, Willard was baptized at the age of 10.³

Education and Marriage

In 1928, Jemson completed his studies at the Canadian Junior College at the age of 18.⁴ He then immigrated to the United States and attended Walla Walla Academy in Washington until 1930. After the academy, he attended Walla Walla College from 1932 to 1935. Later, he attended Boston University from 1953 to 1954.⁵

In 1938, while living in Washington State, Jemson became a U.S. citizen. While there, he met Ruby Gish, and they were married in 1931, during the Great Depression era.⁶ In 1934, in Walla Walla, Washington, Ruby gave birth to a son, whom they named Cyril. He was their only child. Willard was then 23 years old, and Ruby, 24. Cyril Jemson became a successful banker in Boston for many years and died at age 76 in 2009.⁷

Ruby was the daughter of Samuel Franklin and Martha Mariah (Atherton) Gish.⁸ She was the 9th of 10 children in the family. An American, she was born on October 1, 1909, in Capron, Oklahoma. She taught elementary grades in Adventist schools, and she was baptized in 1920. She graduated from Walla Walla College (now Walla Walla University) with a two-year diploma in 1929; she studied German one year and Spanish three years. She played piano and organ. She taught music for 12 years; she also worked as a postal clerk for 1 year and in the dry cleaning business for 2 years. She was a clerk-buyer for 4 years and worked for 8 years as a secretary. She did secretarial work for Atlantic Union College Press and Andrews University Press.⁹

Ministry

Much of Willard's career was spent in printing, graphic arts, and publishing in various assignments in different institutions. He was a linotype foreman of a daily newspaper in Yakima, Washington, from 1935 to 1945. Then from 1945 to 1948, he went back to College Place, Washington, in answer to a call for him to work as production superintendent of Walla Walla College Press. Later, he managed his own dry-cleaning plant!¹⁰

A few years later, he was called to Atlantic Union College, South Lancaster, Massachusetts, as production superintendent of the College Press from 1948 to 1952 and press manager from 1952 to 1956. Then in the spring of 1956, there was a call for him to work at Emmanuel Missionary College (now Andrews University), Berrien Springs, Michigan, as the College Press manager, replacing George H. Jeys. He served Emmanuel Missionary College until 1961.¹¹

In 1961, because of his skills and administrative abilities, he traversed the continent and went to Asia in answer to an invitation for him to work as manager of the Philippine Publishing House, where he served until 1970!¹² He was the 12th manager there. In 1965, under the management of Jemson, the Philippines Publishing House bought the first semi-automatic cutter in the Philippine Publishing House. In the same year, Jemson organized the first national convention of literature evangelists, which was held in Pasonanca Park, Zamboanga City. In 1969, they held the second national convention of literature evangelists in Baguio City, drawing a delegation of close to a thousand colporteurs, and W. A. Higgins was a special guest from the General Conference!¹³

Then he served as the production manager of the Indonesia Publishing House from 1971 to 1976!¹⁴ He was quoted as saying, "My most memorable times were the fourteen years I spent in the Asian countries."¹⁵

After a term with the Indonesia Publishing House, he was called back to the United States to serve as the typographic services director at the Review and Herald Publishing Association in 1977, where he served until he retired.¹⁶

Jemson studied Latin and German for two years, learning both languages together and passing the exam level. He spoke the languages fluently.¹⁷

Later Life

Willard retired from denominational service in 1978 after a total of 33 years of service in different capacities—mostly in the publishing work—and in different Adventist institutions. He, with Ruby, retired to Fort Meyers, Florida, then later to Port Charlotte in 1984. There he spent most of his time—26 years—volunteering for Port Charlotte Library, where he gave nearly six thousand hours of service!¹⁸ The Jemsons later built their retirement home in this community. The couple were active volunteers in the Adventist Community Services Center and the Mid County library. Willard regularly attended the Port Charlotte Adventist Church. Then he was ordained deacon and served in that capacity until a month before his death.¹⁹

On November 23, 2000, Thanksgiving Day, Willard lost Ruby after 69 years of marriage.²⁰ Alone at age 90,²¹ Willard became active in the Veteran Motor Car Club of America. He even restored his 1922 Ford Model T. Nine years later, he lost his son, Cyril, who died at age 76 in 2009.²²

Willard's hobbies included pursuits in amateur radio, flying, and golf. In the 1960s, he frequently piloted aircraft as a missionary in the Philippines. He also held a private pilot's license. He celebrated his 100th birthday by flying a Cessna 172 on March 31 with a licensed pilot and two others who flew with him. Then on April 4, he drove his restored Ford Model T to attend a party prepared in his honor.²³

Death

On April 15, 2010, to the shock and grief of his family, friends, and neighbors, Willard died of complications from pneumonia. He lived a fruitful life of 100 years and 11 days. On April 25, 2010, the funeral service was conducted by Pastor Timothy Goff at the Port Charlotte Church. He was buried, waiting for the Lord's return, at Pine Grove Cemetery, Westford, Middlesex County, Massachusetts, U.S.A. He is survived by his sister Ramona Jemson Anderson of Rancho Cucamonga, his former daughter-in-law, Luise Sandhom of Westford, Massachusetts, three granddaughters; four great-grandchildren; and two great-great-grandchildren. Willard "Dean" Jemson served his last Sabbath as a faithful deacon at Port Charlotte Seventh-day Adventist Church a few weeks before he died.²⁴

Legacy

Because of Jemson's great contribution, the folks at the Port Charlotte Library initiated a ceremony with the Charlotte County Board of Commissioners that proclaimed April 4, 2010, as "Dean Jemson Day" to honor his priceless contribution to the community. One inscription reads, "Whereas, Dean is an inspiration to us all, serving as an example of how to live an active and meaningful life; and our community and its libraries have been enriched by Dean's dedicated service."²⁵

"He was recognized by the community as a perfect gentleman, an informed conversationalist, an astute businessman, a fearless adventurer, and a remarkable man."²⁶ Alison Lane, the librarian supervisor of Port Charlotte Library, said, "Dean is a faithful and hardworking volunteer. He always greets us with a smile and a hug."²⁷

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