

Mershon, LeRoy B. (1884–1974)

TERESA COSTELLO, AND FAI LEONG

Teresa Costello, born in the southwest United States, has served as a missionary in the Pacific under the Far Eastern Division and southeast Asia under the Southern Asia-Pacific Division (SSD) for more than 15 years. With bachelor of arts degrees in English and religion and a master's degree in curriculum and instruction, she served in the SSD Communication department from 2012-2017 and is currently (2020) the *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists* editorial assistant for SSD. With a background in education, journalism, communication, and public speaking, she is a storyteller who enjoys gathering life experiences from those she meets during her travels with her family.

Fai Leong began his pastoral ministry in Kuala Lumpur in 1980, after he graduated from Hong Kong Adventist College. At the time of writing, he was the president of the Peninsular Malaysia Mission.

LeRoy Bell Mershon served for 20 years in the Far Eastern Division. He and his first wife, Myrtle, were among the pioneering workers on Borneo Island where he served as the first director (president) of the British North Borneo Mission.¹ He and his second wife, Elizabeth, served in Borneo, Kuala Lumpur in the Federated Malay States, Singapore, the Visayan islands, and Mindanao in the Philippines.

Early Years

LeRoy Bell Mershon was born October 3, 1884, in Cadiz, Kentucky, USA, to Sarah Lee Jefferson Mershon and Alfred Dyer Mershon.² He was the oldest of nine children and his siblings included Louis (Lewis) J. Mershon, George W. Mershon, Lucy J. Mershon, Cora M. Mershon, Anna G. Mershon, Margret A. Mershon, Ernest A. Mershon, and Alice C. Mershon.³ Pastor Mershon and his brother George were born in Kentucky, but the rest of the siblings were born after the family's move to Oregon which occurred between 1890 and mid-1892.⁴ The family settled in Hurlburt, Oregon, in Multnomah county.⁵ They later lived in Troutdale, Oregon.⁶

LeRoy attended Walla Walla College in Walla Walla, Washington, for his ministerial study.⁷ While a college student, he courted Myrtle Rosealtha Kennedy⁸, born August 14, 1886, in McLeod, Minnesota, to Daniel Chardon Kennedy and Elizabeth Jane Pierce.⁹ He and Myrtle married on May 20, 1913, in Latah, Idaho.¹⁰ He was among the Walla Walla College commencement class featured in the May 1914 *North Pacific Union Gleaner* commencement issue and was listed with a biblical major.¹¹

Ministry in Singapore

On April 11, 1914, the Mershons left their Troutdale, Oregon, home¹² for the journey to serve as one of three couples "secured for the East Indian field."¹³ They arrived in Singapore on May 18, 1914.¹⁴ Upon their arrival, Pastor Mershon was appointed as the secretary and treasurer (listed as Roy L. Mershon) for the Malaysian

Mission¹⁵ and as the director (listed as R. L. Mershon) for the Adventist mission work in Singapore, soon known as the Straits Settlements Mission.¹⁶ Besides his administrative responsibilities, he also gave Bible studies to interested people. A Chinese Bible worker, Chan Teck Sung (known as Mrs. Amy Tan after her marriage), worked with the Chinese contacts.¹⁷

Ministry in British North Borneo (1915-1928)

In September 1915 Pastor Roy P. Montgomery, the pioneering Adventist foreign missionary in Borneo, was informed by local government officials that he could not visit new believers in Menggatal, north of the mission headquarters in Jesselton, nor sell or give away Adventist literature.¹⁸ In November 1915 Pastor Mershon and his wife went to Borneo to relieve the Montgomerys who were due for a furlough.¹⁹ After their arrival, the North Borneo governor forbid Adventist missionaries from even visiting Menggatal.²⁰ When Pastors Montgomery and Mershon visited the governor, they learned that this was an effort to keep the Christian churches separated.²¹ However, an Adventist Chinese missionary, Kong Tsun Ming, was allowed to visit people within a two-mile radius of Jesselton. Later the governor gave permission to Pastor Mershon to sell Adventist literature.²²

Pastor Mershon was assigned to be the president, secretary, and treasurer for the newly formed British North Borneo Mission (BNBM) when the Malaysian Mission was reorganized as the East India Union Mission, comprising the Malaysian and Philippine Missions.²³ In 1917 the Montgomerys chose not to return to the mission field, so the Mershons agreed to continue serving in BNBM.²⁴

That same year, Myrtle Mershon passed away in Sandakan on July 2, 1917, at the age of 31,²⁵ "after a lingering illness of four months."²⁶ Pastor Mershon learned of her death while he was on itinerary visiting those in the field.²⁷ Although he took the first available boat to Singapore and then traveled on to Sandakan, he returned home two weeks after her death.²⁸ He noted,

This lonely grave over here in Java's land is only a call to me to gird on the armor afresh against the hosts of evil until the Lord calls me to lay down the burdens. I have proved Him, and find that He never forsakes us in the hour of trial. There is only one thing I hope the committee will not do, and that is to think I ought to go home to America.²⁹

Three years after the death of his beloved first wife, Pastor R. L. Mershon remarried. His second wife was Elizabeth Pickett Mershon, born February 10, 1880, in Rockhampton, Queensland, Australia. Elizabeth Pickett attended Avondale Missionary College in Cooranbong and the Sydney Sanitarium in New South Wales, Australia.³⁰ Although enrolled in the nursing program, Elizabeth had an accounting background, so she was recruited by Drs. D. H. and Lauretta Kress to provide bookkeeping services for the sanitarium.³¹ A short time after the Kresses repatriated to the United States in 1908, they requested Elizabeth to move to Takoma Park, D.C. to do the bookkeeping work for the Washington Sanitarium.³² The bookkeeping responsibilities for the newly founded

Washington Missionary College were also added to her duties.³³

In 1918 Elizabeth accepted an emergency missionary call to be the union treasurer in Singapore, Straits Settlements.^{34 35} She met Pastor Mershon when he attended a union committee meeting.³⁶ They married in the Adventist church in Singapore on February 10, 1919, and left the next day for Borneo where Pastor Mershon served.³⁷

In the following years, Mrs. Mershon's articles about their missionary experiences were published in various Adventist magazines.³⁸ In 1922 her book about their experiences in Borneo, *With the Wild Men of Borneo*, was published by Pacific Press Publishing Association.³⁹

The mission office in Sandakan was moved to Jesselton (now known as Kota Kinabalu) in 1923.⁴⁰ After the relocation, Pastor Mershon returned to Sandakan in July to complete the new chapel building and it was dedicated on August 27, 1923.⁴¹

The first Dusun school in North Borneo was opened September 16, 1924.⁴² The first Dusun church service was conducted by a schoolteacher, Johannes Passarebo (Pasariboe) on September 27, 1924.⁴³ With the establishment of the school, the Dusun communities were then opened to Bible studies with Adventist Bible workers.⁴⁴

For the first 13 years, the British North Borneo Mission concentrated its efforts on the English-speaking and Chinese communities. At the beginning of 1928, the mission realized that the Chinese work had stagnated.⁴⁵ After the first Dusun school's success among the Dusun locals, Pastor Mershon was more intentional in reaching out to the indigenous people. He entrusted the Chinese work to two senior Chinese workers to oversee a district each so he could focus on indigenous evangelism.⁴⁶

He also invited doctors and nurses to come and start a medical ministry in his territory. Having failed to attract medical personnel, he used simple natural remedies such as fomentation.⁴⁷ This natural remedy was well received by the locals and this approach found favor with the government.⁴⁸ As a result, several indigenous groups in the North Borneo interior, including the Murut, responded to the gospel.⁴⁹ The Seventh-day Adventist Church was the only one that worked among the local people.⁵⁰ As a result, an Adventist Murut School was established in Tenghilan in 1927.⁵¹

In November 1928 the Mershons went to Queensland, Australia, for part of their year-long furlough. While they were in Australia, they visited Mrs. Mershon's family⁵² and attended a camp meeting in Northern Park, North Essendon, Victoria, Australia.⁵³ After four months in Australia, they boarded the *City of Dalhart* on February 25, 1929, and sailed for the USA via the Panama Canal.⁵⁴ While they were in the USA, they visited Pastor Mershon's parents⁵⁵ in Oregon and attended the 1929 General Conference Spring Meeting.⁵⁶ They began their return to the mission field on August 8, 1929, sailing from Vancouver, British Columbia, on the *Empress of Asia*, Canadian Pacific Line.⁵⁷

Ministry in the Malay States Mission (1930-1932)

When the Mershons returned from their furlough, they were sent to Kuala Lumpur to lead the ministry in the Malay States Mission. Their stay in Kuala Lumpur was short, as they were called to the Malaysian Union Mission in 1932.⁵⁸ Thus, they moved to Singapore again.

Ministry in the Philippines (1933-1935)

Pastor Mershon served in the Malayan Union Mission for a year as a pastor in Singapore⁵⁹ before he was called to East Visayan Mission in 1933.⁶⁰ There were many unbelieving tribal groups living an indigenous life in the jungles of Mindanao. Some of these tribes lived away from the main roads; reaching them took more than three days' journey by foot.

In the past, these tribal groups had resisted all attempts to evangelize them.⁶¹ However, the active witnessing of Adventist laymen, which Pastor Mershon supported and encouraged, caused the progress of the message in these hinterlands of Mindanao.⁶² Thus, the people there began requesting that the Adventist Church build chapels in their villages, even before any church worker was sent to their area.⁶³ Apparently, the workload was so heavy and the area so large that Pastor Mershon's mother wrote to the General Conference with great concern in July 1935, since she had not "heard from him in several months."⁶⁴

Permanent Return to the United States (1935)

Years of a grueling schedule, geographical challenges, and frequent travel absences of a spouse can significantly affect missionaries' outlook and mental health. Such was the case of Mrs. Mershon by 1935. At the February 4-18, 1935, Philippine Union Mission (PUM) biennial session,⁶⁵ the Mershons and PUM leaders agreed that a permanent return to the United States would give the physical and mental rest needed for her to be restored to health.^{66 67 68 69 70} Thus, Pastor Mershon applied to return to the United States permanently and his application was granted.⁷¹ On September 27, 1935, they sailed from Manila, Philippines, and arrived in New York on November 10, 1935.⁷²

Later Years

They spent the next two years near Portland, Oregon. During that time, Pastor Mershon conducted a Week of Prayer series from January 24 to February 1, 1936, at Mount Vernon Academy in Ohio.^{73 74} At a March 26, 1936, General Conference officers' meeting, it was voted for the Mershons to attend the 1936 General Conference Session,⁷⁵ not as part of the FED delegation, but in hopes that he would be able to meet conference and union leaders regarding future employment in the U.S.⁷⁶ The General Conference also approved him to assist at the 1936 Oregon and Washington camp meetings for the same reason.⁷⁷ In addition, Pastor Mershon was sent to

Ohio and West Virginia to assist in an April 7-18, 1936, Big Week campaign,⁷⁸ a week of fundraising by church members, via Adventist literature sales, to benefit overseas mission projects and entities.⁷⁹

Although the Mershons requested to return to the mission field,⁸⁰ they were instead asked to work for the Montana Conference. They settled in Helena, Montana,⁸¹ and served in the Montana Conference from 1937 to 1945.⁸² He pastored the churches in the Helena, Butte, and Anaconda areas. These three large cities offered a challenge to his ministry.⁸³

He was transferred to the Idaho Conference in 1946⁸⁴ and served there until he retired in 1956.⁸⁵ During that time they lived in the town of John Day in eastern Oregon for five years and in 1950 they moved to Vale, Oregon,⁸⁶ as both areas were part of the Idaho Conference at the time. Mrs. Mershon served in church treasury for every church they attended.⁸⁷ Pastor Mershon served the church for more than 43 years and retired at the age of 73. Together, the Mershons had more than 103 years of denominational service.⁸⁸

Elizabeth Mershon passed away on February 27, 1960, at the age of 81 at home in Vale, Oregon.⁸⁹ She was buried in the Riverside Cemetery in Payette, Idaho.⁹⁰

Pastor Mershon married his third wife, Cora Isabelle Thomas Eggleston, on October 2, 1960, in Payette, Idaho.⁹¹

He passed away on February 19, 1974 in Vale, Oregon, at the age of 91 and was buried in the Valley View Cemetery in Vale, Oregon.⁹² He was survived by his wife Cora who passed away in 1979.⁹³

Contribution

Pastor Leroy Bell Mershon provided steady and dedicated leadership in newly entered areas of the Asiatic Division and the Far Eastern Division during the pioneer phase of foreign Adventist missions in Southeast Asia. His willingness to persevere in challenging areas and situations enabled the Adventist Church to reach indigenous groups that had previously been resistant to the gospel.

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