

Sturdevant, Kenneth Harold (1906–1999)

GODFREY K. SANG

Godfrey K. Sang is a historical researcher and writer with an interest in Adventist history. He holds a B.A. in History from the University of Eastern Africa Baraton and a number of qualifications from other universities. He is a published author. He is the co-author of the book *On the Wings of a Sparrow: How the Seventh-day Adventist Church Came to Western Kenya*

Kenneth Sturdevant and his wife, Evelyn, devoted their retirement years to medical mission work in Africa (Kenya and Tanganyika), New Guinea, and Thailand.



Evelyn and Kenneth Sturdevant

From *Gleaner*, October 19, 1981.

Early Life

Kenneth Harold Sturdevant was born on November 11, 1906, in Oklahoma, United States.¹ He was the second of the four sons of Arthur Hatch Sturdevant (1878-1948) and Gertrude V. Sturdevant *née* Vass (1881-1940).² His three siblings were: Jesse Edwin Sturdevant, Arthur Gordon Sturdevant, and Robert Malcolm Sturdevant.³ Ed Sturdevant (1904-1981) was, at one time, an engineer in Wyoming. Gordon (1909-1985) was, at one time, a teacher in Ardmore, Oklahoma. Robert, born in 1917, became a math and science teacher for the Upper Columbia Academy in Spangle, Washington, serving also in various schools in other states. In 1951, Robert died suddenly, following an unsuccessful surgery to correct a blood condition.⁴ Kenneth studied at Loma Linda where he earned his M.D. degree.⁵

It is important to note that Kenneth Sturdevant was not related to Elder Melvin C. Sturdevant and his wife Margaret J. Sturdevant, who were early American missionaries to Africa. Arriving in 1902, this couple spent twenty-seven years in mission work in Africa, that included eight years at Solusi Mission, four at Inyazura in Southern Rhodesia, and the remainder in Durban, South Africa. They returned to the United States in 1929.⁶

Family

Dr. Kenneth Sturdevant married Evelyn Ruth *née* Leo.⁷ Evelyn was born in 1908, and she was the daughter of Robert James Leo and Mabel Williams of Hartland, Vermont.⁸ They were married in 1932 and the following year were blessed with a daughter, Marylin Jeanne Sturdevant (1933-2019).⁹ Marylin became the wife of Nolan Walter Cramer (1933-2010).¹⁰ Dr. Sturdevant had a rich medical career. He retired in 1965 with a desire to devote his retirement years to medical mission work.

Mission Work in Africa (1965-1970)

In 1962, Dr. Kenneth Sturdevant accepted the call to work with the Adventist Church. He first began working at the Washington Conference as a member of the executive committee.¹¹ In 1964, Sturdevant accepted the call to work for the Tanganyika Union.¹² He was appointed the medical director for Heri Hospital in northern Tanzania. He was also appointed the medical departmental director at the Union, so he operated from Busegwe, near Musoma, where the offices of the Tanzania Union were based.¹³ In April 1965, he arrived in Tanzania with his wife, who also became a licensed missionary in the Tanzania Union. F. G. Thomas served as the president of the Tanzania Union.¹⁴

In 1966 after only a year at Heri, he moved to Kenya to serve as the medical director of the Kendu Mission Hospital in western Kenya.¹⁵ He took over from A. W. Perepelitza, who oversaw the hospital from 1963. In September 1967, he applied for and was granted a license by the Kenya Medical and Dentist's board in Nairobi, he and was gazetted in the official government paper.¹⁶ He was now able to see patients in Kenya. The other doctor working with him at Kendu was Dr. Drusilla Hertogs, the daughter of Ruth V. Gorle of Solusi College. She was one of the few female doctors not just within the Adventist health system, but also across the entire health sector. She had also received her license from the same board.¹⁷ Dr. Hertogs held a medical degree from the University of Cape Town.¹⁸ Her brother, Timothy V. Gorle, was the principal of the Kamagambo Training School between 1965 and 1967.

At the hospital, Evelyn Sturdevant was in charge of finances and the payroll. Since workers in Kenya were paid in cash, she had to count out every tungalo (c. 1.4 cents in American money at that time) one by one. Dr. Sturdevant called Africa "a surgeon's paradise," by which he meant to describe the huge extent of need to be met by him and his medical team. Life conditions were far from paradise. A report from their time in Kenya reads:

Because of malnourishment, children are subject to every kind of tropical disease and parasite, plus an influx of western diseases. The worst aspect of African life, Sturdevant said, was the widespread malaria. Everyone had it. Babies were born with the dreaded cerebral malaria and died with it. There were parasites, too, and like the malaria, the situation was epidemic. Certain kinds of cancers related to malnutrition, such as liver and lymph system cancers, were common.¹⁹

Dr. Sturdevant also became an instructor at the School of Nursing alongside the Sister Tutor June E. Wilson and Veryl D. Mitchell.²⁰

He was also appointed the medical departmental director at the East Africa Union. While at Kendu, Dr. Sturdevant moved to satellite clinics under the Kendu Hospital where he could see patients. The clinics were as far away as Kebeneti in Kericho, and also Kabokyek. While in Kenya, he also served on the board of the Kamagambo Secondary and Training School.²¹ As the medical departmental director at the EAU, he also worked at the Ishaka Hospital in Bushenyi, Mbarara, western Uganda.²²

While serving in Kenya, Dr. Sturdevant oversaw the establishment of the Nairobi Surgery in Kenya's Industrial Area, south of Nairobi.²³ The busy facility was run by Mrs. E. Barton, R.N., who was seeing over 40 patients per day.²⁴

Return to America

Dr. Sturdevant arrived in East Africa when it was still newly independent, and there were many political changes taking place. Tanzania adopted socialism in 1967, greatly disrupting the Adventist work, particularly in the schools and hospitals being nationalized. Within church circles, Kenya was removed from the Trans-Africa Division (based in Rhodesia, which had just declared itself independent under a white minority rule, attracting sanctions from independent African nations). This made it difficult to continue affiliation with the Division.

In July 1969, popular Kenyan politician Tom Mboya was assassinated, throwing Kenya into turmoil. This all culminated in violent anti-government riots. In 1970, Kenya became part of the Afro-Mideast Division, which was based in Beirut, Lebanon. This caused administrative changes in Kenya. Shortly after that, Uganda came under the military regime of Idi Amin Dada, which further added to the disruptions faced by the Adventist Church. The political uncertainties, at this time, caused many expatriates to leave East Africa. It soon became necessary for Dr. Sturdevant to leave Kenya.

Other Mission Fields

In 1970, Dr. Kenneth H. Sturdevant left East Africa Union and returned to the United States. He returned to private practice. With his departure, Kendu Mission Hospital suffered a shortage of staff, with Dr. Hertogs remaining as the sole doctor for a 123-bed facility.²⁵ The following year, 1971, Dr. E. C. Kraft replaced Dr. Sturdevant as the medical director.²⁶

Kenneth and Evelyn Sturdevant continued their missionary service. They worked for a three-month period in New Guinea in 1979, six weeks in Zambia, and three times they have visited Thailand. The first trip they worked in the church hospital in Bangkok; the second and third trips they spent in refugee camps on the Campuchian (formerly Cambodian) border.

Commenting on his work in Thailand, he said malaria was rampant in the refugee camps there, as well, and extremely difficult to treat. The first time he visited, there was a great deal of malnutrition. That has been relieved because the United Nations now feeds the refugees, and there are hundreds of volunteers working to relieve their suffering.²⁷

Legacy

Kenneth Harold Sturdevant died on October 15, 1999, in Pierce, Washington, United States, at the age of 92.²⁸ The Sturdevants' legacy is best expressed in their own words. Looking back over their experiences, they said, "There is still much to do. Volunteers are still needed. The reward is excellent although not financial. Our Lord has said, 'Inasmuch as you have done it to the least of these my children you have done it unto Me.'²⁹

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