



Dr. Arthur C. Selmon and Dr. Bertha E. Selmon with their adopted Chinese children, Ruth, and Paul.

Photo courtesy of Center for Adventist Research.

# Selmon, Bertha Eugenia (Loveland) (1877–1949) and Arthur Clifford (1877–1931)

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Early Adventist physicians served as medical missionaries to China. They also contributed as evangelists, teachers, administrators, and each wrote copiously for church publications or edited various publications. Arthur's Chinese name was *Pirinyin shī liè mín*), and Bertha's Chinese name was *Pinyin hé shī shū dé*).

## Early Life

Bertha was born on December 15, 1877, to Nicholas E. Loveland (1852-1929) and Annie E. Parker (1857-1910), in Columbus Grove, Ohio.<sup>1</sup> Her mother converted to Adventism about 1884.<sup>2</sup> As a young girl, she attended the Adventist Church in Clyde, Ohio. In the fall of 1886, she was baptized at the Ohio camp meeting by R. A. Underwood.<sup>3</sup> The death of a neighbor's child, who she tried to help, prompted her to study medicine. She raised her initial \$30 canvassing, going on to study at Battle Creek College where she graduated in 1898.<sup>4</sup>

Arthur Clifford Selmon was born to George Washington Selmon (1850-1938) and Mary E. née Helmick (1856-1935) on December 26, 1877, in Columbus Junction, Iowa.<sup>5</sup> Arthur grew up in a Methodist home and attended Mount Pleasant Academy in Iowa.<sup>6</sup> He graduated from Howe's Academy with honors in 1896. He dated his conversion to the Spring of 1897 from reading Adventist literature.<sup>7</sup> He then went on to spend two years at Keokuk Medical College.<sup>8</sup>

The couple both matriculated to Dr. John Harvey Kellogg's American Medical Missionary College where they both graduated with degrees in medicine in 1902. The next year Arthur taught anatomy and physiology at the University of Illinois.<sup>9</sup> The nuptials wedded on July 6, 1903, in a ceremony at Battle Creek, Michigan, officiated by W. W. Prescott and A. G. Daniells.<sup>10</sup> Arthur was also ordained as a minister soon after he arrived in China by H. W. Miller and Eric Pilquist.<sup>11</sup>

## Missionary Beginnings (1903 to 1904)

On October 5, 1903, Arthur and Bertha left on the "Empress of India" from Vancouver with Dr. H. W. and Maude T. Miller, along with Charlotte Simpson and Carrie Ericksen.<sup>12</sup> After a brief stopover in Japan, they arrived in Shanghai where they stayed for four days gathering supplies and then went up the Yangtze River into the interior as far as they could, after which point they spent four more days "traveling on wheelbarrows and donkey carts."<sup>13</sup> The group was part of a third wave of Adventist missionary reinforcements, first with Abram La Rue as a self-supporting missionary in 1888, then with J. N. and Emma Anderson who with Ida Thompson went as reinforcements in 1902 to Hong Kong, and then this "third wave" of missionaries the following year. Another missionary couple, Eric and Ida Pilquist, had embraced Adventism and had begun initial efforts to establish an Adventist missionary presence in mainland China. This "third wave" of missionaries was in response to this call for help to establish the first permanent Adventist mission station in central China. Shortly before they arrived, the Pilquists decided to locate the new mission station at Sin Tsai Hsien, where this new missionary group arrived on November 7, 1903,<sup>14</sup> as the location for their new missionary base of operations from which they

would eventually branch out from this focal point.<sup>15</sup>

Upon their arrival they were inundated with sick patients. One such patient was miraculously healed.<sup>16</sup> Arthur complained about the adoption of foreign vices, such as cigarettes, that made missionary work even more challenging.<sup>17</sup> Bertha was particularly concerned about infanticide.<sup>18</sup> She estimated that six out of ten babies in the interior of China perished before the age of three.<sup>19</sup> Soon the Selmons moved half a mile away into their “own little compound.” The new place had two homes with mud brick houses and dirt floors. They hoped to have boards on the floor like the original mission, but wood was very expensive. Despite this they were “just getting our home settled” feeling “happy and contented.” In addition to treating the sick, they worked diligently to learn the language from a recent native convert, from which they hoped to be able to soon share their faith.<sup>20</sup>

Early on Bertha shared a passion for reaching out to women. Their first convert from the higher classes was won, despite bitter opposition, when Bertha asked her to help her understand the language. The woman, Mrs. Liu, was curious about the medical work they did. Later Mrs. Liu asked Bertha if she would like to do something for the girls and young women in the city to help them learn to read. This led to the opening of a school, the very first church school in China after the one begun just slightly earlier by Ida Thompson in Canton.<sup>21</sup> Ida Pilquist had trained one woman as a Bible worker and they hoped to soon start a Bible school for these women.<sup>22</sup> They furthermore noted how their initial plans have “greatly changed since coming here.”<sup>23</sup> One such change was following the example of Eric Pilquist to do itinerant medical and evangelistic work.

Based upon their missionary experience, they concluded that the converted Chinese is the “most effective worker” to reach their own people.<sup>24</sup> They continued to learn the customs, for example, learning to celebrate their first Chinese New Year, “a great national holiday.”<sup>25</sup> They also began to learn about the “great religions of China-- Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism-- yet ancestral worship is a feature common to all.” In each home was an ancestral tablet from which mothers train children at a young age “to worship their ancestors.”<sup>26</sup> As a result, Arthur noticed the “great need of women as missionaries here in China. The lady missionary can go with her Bible into the home and present the gospel to the mother, and in this way strike at the very root of this false religion.”<sup>27</sup>

The Selmons also began to experience some “bitter” opposition against their missionary efforts.<sup>28</sup> As Bertha would later remember: “There is no romance in going out into the field. There are obstacles to meet, difficulties to overcome.”<sup>29</sup> One path to overcome these obstacles was through medical treatments that helped “prepare hearts to hear and receive the gospel.”<sup>30</sup> The unhygienic conditions and lack of medical care meant the “life span was shortened so much in China that the average length of life was probably only about thirty years.”<sup>31</sup> They also continued their plans to quickly establish a school to train “both native and foreign workers.”<sup>32</sup>

Thus, early on these Adventist missionaries embraced a threefold missionary strategy of training local people to do evangelism, the establishment of a printing press with the dissemination of materials in the local language,

and a health clinic with which to minister to the sick. "The people of this province," wrote Arthur, "who have heard of the Sabbath and the other truths of the third angel's message call it the 'true doctrine.'<sup>33</sup> At times their work could be dangerous. On one itinerant journey, Arthur and Harry W. Miller were attacked by bandits. Arthur was injured with bruises on his shoulders and a cut hand.<sup>34</sup> Despite this, "In order to work successfully, the missionary must come in close touch with the people and be one among them; and to do this, he must be well acquainted with the language and the life of those among whom he is working."<sup>35</sup> While here the Selmons adopted a Chinese girl who they would raise as their own, Ruth (1905-1945). (Later they would also adopt a boy, Paul Lyle [1907-1929].)

## Missionary Expansion (1904–1909)

In 1904 the group of missionaries felt sufficiently comfortable with the language to expand in different directions about a day's journey between one another.<sup>36</sup> Carrie Erickson and Charlotte Simpson would remain behind in Sin Tsai Hsien with Dr. H. W. Miller; the Pilquists relocated to Lo San, 35 miles east to Hsiang-Cheng (Siang-Cheng).<sup>37</sup>

Early on Bertha made a particular effort to reach the women in this new location. She hired a woman to do her sewing, and when she was not well, she was able to visit her home to offer her treatment. She befriended this woman and was invited to teach a group of women how to sing hymns. As she explained the words, she found this an easy way to share her beliefs. She noted the harsh conditions under which these women worked to support their families.<sup>38</sup> Over time Bertha expanded her work for women and children. "Chinese customs in dispensary work," she noted, "as well as in most other matters, required that men and women groups should be separate. Even in the chapels a partition divided the room into two parts, so that the women sat on one side and the men on the other."<sup>39</sup>

The Selmons continued to work in culturally sensitive ways to interest people in the Adventist message. For example, recognizing the great value placed upon written characters, the Selmons would wrap medicine within a tract. This was apparently quite effective for some who would not ordinarily listen to them openly share their beliefs.<sup>40</sup> Arthur also worked on developing a primer for school use.<sup>41</sup> They worked closely with Dr. H. W. Miller to develop the very first Adventist periodical launched in June 1905.<sup>42</sup> Arthur was especially concerned that future missionaries "live close to the people." They should regard "their native helpers as brethren and fellow workers" and avoid "anything that would lead to any feeling of caste springing up." They should avoid all outward display and adopt "the dress of the people."<sup>43</sup>

The Selmons wrote regularly for church publications urging young people to consider a missionary vocation. Arthur especially agreed with Ellen G. White's warnings about young people not going to study in Battle Creek lest they lose this missionary spirit.<sup>44</sup> "The missionary activity of Seventh-day Adventists," wrote Arthur, "is the best index of their faith in the soon coming of the Lord."<sup>45</sup>

In 1906 there was a resurgence of another nativist uprising (a so-called return of the earlier “Boxer uprising”) from which many missionaries fled. At that moment Arthur was away in Hankow; so, he hurried back where they stayed quietly at their mission post trusting that the Lord would “let us know when (we needed) to leave.”<sup>46</sup> This work unfortunately delayed Bertha, who attempted to start a girls’ school, but after this trouble, many girls were afraid to attend. Instead, they used the time to raise funds and send copies of Adventist publications to the estimated 290 Christian mission stations across China. This led to P. J. Laird, an Anglican missionary, to convert to Adventism.<sup>47</sup> The Selmons also spent about a month translating and preparing an Adventist hymnal in Chinese.<sup>48</sup> Within a short time, Bertha had her girls’ school back and running again. She also began to train a local woman whom she had taught to read and write.<sup>49</sup>

In early 1907 there were two significant turning points. First, Arthur baptized his first convert, a young man he called “Evangelist” Wun, on January 12, 1907, after two years of preparation and assistance with holding evangelistic meetings.<sup>50</sup> A second major turning point was the organization of the Adventist missionary work in China at a “Shanghai Council” held February 10-20, 1907. At this gathering the early missionaries, with new recruits, gathered from various mission stations (many of whom had never met fellow missionaries due to the significant distance between mission stations). They organized several committees of which Arthur served on the publishing committee, and Bertha served on committees to develop a “uniform hymn book” for the whole field and to promote the Sabbath School work. Other recommendations concerned developing systems for the various Adventist missions to work in concert together.<sup>51</sup> This meeting was also notable because Arthur served as a translator for W. W. Prescott, from the General Conference, demonstrating how the Selmons had become fluent in the “Chinese language.”<sup>52</sup> He furthermore noted that it was difficult to literally translate Adventist literature into the Chinese language noting that it “must be adapted to the people.”<sup>53</sup>

Afterward the Selmons took a trip 600 miles north to Peking (Beijing) where they observed heightened security and even watched as the Chinese emperor went to the Temple of Heaven to sacrifice. The well drilled military, Arthur noted, rivaled that of any in the world. As they traveled, they visited various Christian missions and were “surprised” to see students at these schools marching and practicing military drills. Arthur expressed concern that “Mission work has been so mixed up with politics that it could not be otherwise.” He feared lest this might hinder the spread of the Christian faith in China.<sup>54</sup> Another major challenge was malaria and cholera. Dr. H. W. Miller noted that he would see the Selmons about once every three months, and that all the missionaries had taken turns getting malaria.<sup>55</sup> Similarly, these early missionaries faced early bouts with cholera too.<sup>56</sup>

From December 8-14, 1907, the Selmons hosted the first ever Bible training institute for a week with 50 interested believers from surrounding missions who came for Bible instruction. The Selmon’s mission station at Siang Cheng was the most centrally located and “commodious and convenient” place where they hosted the meeting. Other missionaries who participated included John and Christine Westrup, Esta Miller, and F. A. and Eva Allum. At the close of the meeting Arthur baptized seven people. They held the first documented communion service by Adventist missionaries in China and organized a church at Siang Cheng.<sup>57</sup> A second

“general meeting” was held starting on October 24, 1908, for nine days in Cheo Chia K’ou. These training sessions set a pattern whereby these early missionaries invested in the local people, training and equipping them to reach others.<sup>58</sup>

In 1908 the Selmons went with the Allums and E. Miller to “open up work in Cheo Chia K’o (K’ou)” in Honan province.<sup>59</sup> Initially this move “caused something of a stir.”<sup>60</sup> They refused to subscribe to the division of territory between denominations that was a hallmark of the 1907 Robert Morrison centennial meetings. Although Adventists saw themselves as friendly to these other missionary efforts, their refusal to actively participate caused the China Inland Mission to “declare a boycott against any and all of our (Adventist) literature.”<sup>61</sup> They also relocated because the new location was at a major intersection of the railroad and river connections.<sup>62</sup> This latter venture didn’t last long for the Selmons, due to Bertha’s poor health (“a grave tropical malady”<sup>63</sup>—possibly a bad attack of malaria), which necessitated their seeking refuge from the heat at Moh Kan Shan (Mohkaashan) (near Shanghai). The General Conference granted them sick leave in conjunction with their participation at the upcoming 1909 General Conference session.<sup>64</sup> Elder R. F. Cottrell took over their missionary work while they went abroad.<sup>65</sup> Just before the Selmons left, they attended another “important gathering” that further organized the Adventist missionary work in China, held January 12-22, 1909. At this meeting Arthur was elected superintendent of the Central Division. After the meeting closed, the Selmons joined other missionaries on their return voyage to the United States.<sup>66</sup>

## Visit to the United States in 1909

While the Selmons recuperated in the United States, they traveled offering missionary talks. At Union College they spoke “about the preparation needed for becoming a missionary.”<sup>67</sup> Dr. A. C. Selmon was requested by the General Conference Committee, as they waited for the upcoming General Conference session, to spend 2 to 3 months “giving special instruction in tropical diseases and the Chinese language.”<sup>68</sup>

At the actual 1909 General Conference, the Selmons played an active role. They joined with other missionaries to sing “a hymn in the Mandarin language.” The hymn was composed by Pastor His, and the translated title was “I once was a sinner bound in sin; Jesus set me free.” Immediately afterward Bertha gave a report, dressed in Chinese garb, on the “Work for Women in China.”<sup>69</sup> Arthur chaired the sessions concerning the Medical Missionary Department. After the session the Selmons spoke at several camp meetings.<sup>70</sup> Their two adopted children, Ruth and Paul, “attracted a great deal of attention.”<sup>71</sup> Apparently their recruitment was effective as more conferences pledged to financially support missionary work by supplying funds and even the salary of new workers. When they left from Vancouver on October 20, 1909, they returned with new “recruits”: E. W. Wolf and wife (from Stuart, Iowa), Fred and Minnie Lee (from the Washington Foreign Mission Seminary), Dr. A. G. Larson and wife (from Nebraska), and Sherman A. and Mary Nagel, from the Loma Linda College of Medical Evangelists, and Orrin A. and Elizabeth Hall, and their child, from Nebraska.<sup>72</sup>

## Publishing Work in Shanghai (1910–Onward)

Upon their return to China, the Selmons remained in Shanghai where Arthur was asked to serve as the editor of the church's paper, *Shi Chao Yueh Pao* (*The Signs of the Times*).<sup>73</sup> Unfortunately, soon after their return, the publishing house had a disastrous fire. Arthur went to work rebuilding, purchasing a new “diamond cylinder press, hand-power series,” along with ambitious new plans to expand the publishing work. A gas engine quickly increased their printing capacity.<sup>74</sup> He furthermore developed special evangelistic numbers for the Chinese New Year and the six-month Nanjing Exposition.<sup>75</sup>

The hard work in print paid rich dividends. From 1909 when the average monthly issue was 5,000 copies by the end of 1910, they were printing 12,000 copies. Similarly, the Sabbath calendar in 1910 sold 85,000 copies; by 1911 over 200,000 copies sold.<sup>76</sup> In 1911 Arthur wrote a tract titled *Suggestions on the Care of the Health in Tropical Countries* (Washington, D.C.: Medical Missionary Department of the General Conference, 1912).<sup>77</sup> This tract was meant to better educate future missionaries so that they would be better prepared to face the realities and challenges of harsh conditions, diseases, and how to stay well. It would later be widely translated into other languages too. The Selmons, as physicians, had watched many missionaries come and go, and more than a few had either died or were forced to return home due to “broken health.”

The year 1911 marked a severe famine in which many people died and that ultimately sparked a violent revolution that led to the overthrow of the Qing dynasty.<sup>78</sup> Many missionaries fled to the mission headquarters in Shanghai. The Selmons worked to accommodate and take care of them, praising the Lord that no missionary lives were lost. Unfortunately, the main missionary compound in Chang-sha was destroyed.<sup>79</sup> The Selmons began to take on a role as more senior missionaries training new missionaries about the culture and teaching language classes.<sup>80</sup> As things stabilized, Arthur led a group of missionaries to return to the mission and held evangelistic meetings. Afterward they baptized nine individuals.<sup>81</sup> The itinerary extended nine weeks across Hunan, Hupeh, Honan, and Anhwei provinces. An additional 58 individuals were baptized at other meetings, held as many as four times a day, during the trip.<sup>82</sup>

During 1912 Arthur took I. H. Evans, the new superintendent of the China Mission, on another evangelistic tour. During March and April they held meetings in Swatow, Amoy, and Fatshan. In one such “revival” meeting there was over a hundred persons who committed to the Adventist message. In each place they celebrate the Lord's Supper. Evans noted that these were not “rice Christians” but individuals who were very sincere about their faith.<sup>83</sup> Bertha continued to work on innovative ideas to help girls find ways to fund their education at the girls' school. One such plan involved a doll production business.<sup>84</sup> With the new restructuring, Arthur in January 1913 became the superintendent of the East China Mission based in Shanghai.<sup>85</sup>

A major initiative was the development of a dispensary in the marketplace to the east of the Shanghai mission and press property. After two previous failed attempts, this third effort succeeded making its debut on August 1, 1912.<sup>86</sup> A second major initiative was the development of the China Mission Training School that opened in 1912.

Arthur Selmon was responsible for teaching science.<sup>87</sup> When the school officially opened with 51 students on Oct. 13, 1912, the Selmons participated in part of the opening exercises.<sup>88</sup> By the end of the first school year, attendance increased to 61 students.<sup>89</sup> Church members around the world contributed their offerings from the thirteenth Sabbath on March 28, 1914, to assist with the development of these institutions.

During a visit by A. G. Daniells to China in 1915, it was decided at another meeting that the Selmons should pioneer as medical missionaries in Peking (Beijing). Another major development at this meeting was the sale of *books* in Chinese by colporteurs (up until then they had sold calendars and magazines).<sup>90</sup> The departure of R. F. Cottrell on furlough for a year necessitated that the Selmons return to cover for their absence instead.<sup>91</sup> While away the Shanghai Sanitarium was managed by “trained native nurses” under the direction of Sister H. J. Doolittle.<sup>92</sup> In 1916 Arthur collaborated with Fred Lee to conduct a series of ministerial institutes. Their intention was to develop indigenous leadership for the Adventist denomination in China.<sup>93</sup> By August 1, 1916, the Selmons traveled with the Loveland family to Peking as originally planned to pioneer new work in that region but were delayed once again by a request to spend a year in Nanking training new missionaries in the Chinese language.<sup>94</sup> That same year, when the Asiatic Division was organized, Arthur was placed in charge of the medical missionary work for the division.<sup>95</sup> Bertha around this time began a series of readers for elementary schools suitable for the first five years of school work.<sup>96</sup>

In 1917, as the work of the denomination continued to grow, the various missions were organized into an overarching union conference called the North China Union Mission. Bertha served as medical secretary for the union.<sup>97</sup> Arthur would be relieved of editorial work by George Harlow for *Hsing Chwan Luh*, and other editorial responsibilities would be picked up by the young Le Roy Edwin Froom.<sup>98</sup> As the Selmons prepared for furlough, the outbreak of the influenza necessitated special measures such as urging missionaries to wear masks.<sup>99</sup> As World War I came to an end, the Red Cross Hospital in Shanghai became available and became the new location for a significantly expanded Shanghai Sanitarium.<sup>100</sup>

## Furlough and Final Years

In 1918 the Selmons went on their second furlough to the United States. This time the Selmons would seek post-graduate training, and their living expenses were sponsored by the denomination.<sup>101</sup> They spent time at the College of Medical Evangelists in Loma Linda, California, and Hinsdale Sanitarium in Illinois. Similar to their earlier furlough, the Selmons once again visited a series of camp meetings.<sup>102</sup> By early August 1919 the Selmons sailed on the S.S. *China* with a group of missionaries back to the land that they loved so much.<sup>103</sup>

Soon after their return, Bertha's brother, Olan A. Loveland (1899--1920) tragically died in a motorcycle accident. He had gone to China as a missionary less than a year before.<sup>104</sup> Upon their return to China, the Selmons entered into some “independent (missionary) work.”<sup>105</sup> They still remained connected to the Shanghai Sanitarium, and as late as 1925 both retained denominational credentials.<sup>106</sup> What is clear is that after their



return to China in 1919 their writing for denominational articles dropped off precipitously. The Selmons appear to have increasingly distanced themselves from the denomination through the early 1920s.

By early 1924 the Selmons requested the General Conference Committee for permission to return once again for "special medical work." The request was denied.<sup>107</sup> The Selmons returned home in June 1924 at their own expense where they worked as private physicians and practiced industrial medicine with the W. K. Kellogg Corn Flakes Company.<sup>108</sup> Arthur served as medical director for the Kellogg company and as assistant director of the Kellogg Foundation. In this latter capacity he helped plan the foundation's work at the Ann J. Kellogg school, a school for special needs children.<sup>109</sup> Their adopted children, Ruth and Paul, both attended school. Paul attended Battle Creek College for one year, and then two years at Pacific Union College, before returning home after contracting tuberculosis where he died at the age of 21.<sup>110</sup> Bertha was one of the founders of the Maternal Health Center and served as its clinician from 1932 to 1943. After Arthur's death on May 16, 1931, at the age of 53,<sup>111</sup> the General Conference sent their condolences to Bertha thanking them for their work as "pioneers" of the denomination's work "in inland China and later in connection with the medical work in Shanghai."<sup>112</sup> After his death, Bertha furthered her two main interests: education about birth control and planned parenthood and her study of the lives and careers of women physicians. She served as history editor of the *Medical Women's Journal* and collected pictures and stories about female physicians. In 1942 she wrote a book about their experience as missionaries in China, *They Do Meet: Cross-Trails of American Physicians and Chinese People*. While the book extensively documents their story as missionaries, the book makes no reference whatsoever to the Seventh-day Adventist Church that they were a part of and operated within its missionary network. Her research papers are found in the Bentley Historical Library at the University of Michigan.<sup>113</sup> Bertha died in 1949, and they are buried next to one another in Oak Hill Cemetery in Battle Creek, Michigan.<sup>114</sup> A memorial chair was established at the Women's Medical College in Philadelphia after her death in honor of Bertha's contributions.<sup>115</sup>

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## NOTES

1. For detailed genealogical information on the Selmons, see: [https://www.ancestry.com/family-](https://www.ancestry.com/family-tree/pt/R5VP.aspx?dat=MTC5MDE2Mjg4OzswMjhhNzUyNS0wMDA2LTAwMDAtMDAwMC0wMDAwMDAwMDAwMDAwMDA7MjAyMTExMDcxMTIyNDE7MQ==&mac=3)

[tree/pt/R5VP.aspx?dat=MTC5MDE2Mjg4OzswMjhhNzUyNS0wMDA2LTAwMDAtMDAwMC0wMDAwMDAwMDAwMDAwMDA7MjAyMTExMDcxMTIyNDE7MQ==&mac=3](https://www.ancestry.com/family-tree/pt/R5VP.aspx?dat=MTC5MDE2Mjg4OzswMjhhNzUyNS0wMDA2LTAwMDAtMDAwMC0wMDAwMDAwMDAwMDAwMDA7MjAyMTExMDcxMTIyNDE7MQ==&mac=3)

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