

Kilgore, Rochelle (Philmon) (1887–1993)

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Rochelle Florence Philmon Kilgore, an exemplary student, a church school teacher, an English professor, an international student recruiter, and centenarian, was born on a cotton plantation in Reynolds Georgia on July 25, 1887. Her parents were John Wesley Philmon (1844-1925) and Julia Ella Windham Philmon (1860-1932). She had two brothers and two sisters.¹

Even as a small child, she seems to have visualized herself as a teacher. When she would play with the neighborhood children, they would often play school. “Of course, I was always the teacher,” she recalled. Later, other children would stop by her house after school to have her tutor them in mathematics.²

Graysville

She must have been thrilled when Robert Kilgore, the head of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination in the southeastern United States, visited her home to persuade her reluctant parents to send Rochelle to Southern Training School (STS) in Graysville, Tennessee, a forerunner of Southern Adventist University. He told them that if she went there, she could become a teacher. As a student at STS, the strength of her religious commitment inspired and encouraged her teachers.³



Rochelle Philmon Kilgore.

From *Adventist Heritage*, Vol. 14, No. 2, Fall 1991, page 9. Photo courtesy of Dennis Pettibone.

Graduating in 1904 at the age of 17, she immediately became a church school teacher⁴ in Georgia and then in Florida. After that, she was the Sabbath School secretary and home missionary secretary for the Georgia Conference.⁵ Five years after her graduation, she returned to Graysville as a member of the STS faculty. She started out teaching the intermediate grades,⁶ but then moved up to teaching English and Latin in the training school language department.⁷

On February 18, 1915, the girls' dormitory burned down. There were only three injuries and no fatalities, but the girls lost nearly all of their clothing. Rochelle Philmon was one of the people who helped the girls replace their clothing. She donated quite a few skirts and blouses.⁸

She remained at STS until the school renamed itself Southern Junior College and moved to Collegedale, Tennessee. Miss Philmon remained at Graysville, administering the private academy that was left behind.⁹ She was a teaching principal at the new Graysville Academy from 1916 to 1919.¹⁰

Union College

She graduated from Union College in 1920 and spent the rest of the decade at Union's faculty.¹¹ She was originally hired to teach Latin,¹² but from the second year on, she was an English teacher,¹³ with her designation eventually being listed as a professor of English language and literature.¹⁴ While she was at Union, she earned her Master's degree from the University of Georgia (1924).¹⁵

In 1929, she married Charles Luther Kilgore (1869-1941),¹⁶ whose father had persuaded Rochelle's parents to send her to Graysville.¹⁷ Charles had been on the faculty of STS as teacher and business manager when she was a student there.¹⁸ When he was at STS, he was married to Letha Ethel Hall, but Letha passed away on July 30, 1929.¹⁹ When he married Rochelle, Charles was the executive secretary and treasurer of the Atlantic Union Conference of Seventh-day Adventists headquartered in South Lancaster, Massachusetts.²⁰ Consequently, when Rochelle married him, she moved to South Lancaster.

Atlantic Union College

Rochelle Kilgore joined the English faculty of Atlantic Union College (AUC) in 1936.²¹ According to AUC historian Myron Wehtje, she "emerged as the outstanding [AUC] teacher of the next quarter century."²² During at least some of that time she was the English Department chair.²³ Former students remembered her classes fondly and enthusiastically. At least one of them shared with the author an example of how she integrated faith and learning.²⁴ It was reported that her classes were "so popular that she would fill rooms with anxiously awaiting students even after classes had been move because of limited capacity in a previous room." She was described as "an intriguing teacher" who "spoke very softly."²⁵

During World War II, Mrs. Kilgore was given the additional assignment as AUC's servicemen's secretary.²⁶ In this capacity, she corresponded with hundreds of Seventh-day Adventists in the armed services, encouraging them to finish their college education when they completed their tour of duty. Shortly after the war, AUC President Lewis Holm sent her to Germany to recruit servicemen in person. The college paid for that trip, but over the years, she made 24 additional trips to Germany at her own expense,²⁷ attending and speaking at servicemen's retreats in Berchtesgarden.²⁸ She also recruited students at American camp meetings.²⁹ Not satisfied with just recruiting students, she helped 94 of them afford to remain in college by allowing them stay in her home at no financial cost.³⁰

Mrs. Kilgore retired from full-time teaching in 1960 at the age of 74, but she continued to teach part-time. She was listed as a member of the AUC English faculty as late as 1976. In addition, she served as director of the college's placement service throughout the early 1970s. She also worked with the alumni association in her "retirement" years, editing the *Golden Chapter Newsletter* for AUC alumni who had graduated at least 50 years previously. She quit working at the alumni office just before her 100th birthday.³¹

In addition to her work for AUC, Mrs. Kilgore was a member of the Lancaster Historical Society and a correspondent for the Clinton, Massachusetts, *Daily Item*, for which she wrote more than 15,000 column inches.

During her retirement years, Mrs. Kilgore received a number of honors. In 1977, she became the first person to receive an honorary doctorate from AUC.³² The previous year, one of her former students, Dr. Lessie Culpepper Hagan, honored her as "one of the great women in our century" with a plaque and a check for \$1,000 made out to Atlantic Union College. Mrs. Marion Jung Nelson, wife of a former AUC president, presented the award to her on behalf of Dr. Hagan in a private ceremony.³³

Hundreds of people attended her 100th birthday celebration held in the AUC gymnasium on July 25, 1987. She helped blow out the 100 candles on her birthday cake and received a gift-wrapped box of cards and letters sent by well-wishers who also contributed more than \$8,000 "in her honor" to the AUC endowment fund. The college presented her a rocking chair bearing the AUC seal. Among those sending birthday greetings were U.S. President Ronald Reagan, General Conference President Neal Wilson, and NBC Weatherman Willard Scott. In reporting on the celebration, AUC Publicity Coordinator Mary Norcliffe noted that, unlike most centenarians, Mrs. Kilgore still walked "to church and to the post office... at a stately pace."³⁴

She lived on another five years, passing away at her home on the AUC campus on February 23, 1993.³⁵

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NOTES

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2. Mary Norcliffe, "Centenarian Educator Honored," *Atlantic Union Gleaner*, September 3, 1987, 6.
3. Dennis Pettibone, *A Century of Challenge: The Story of Southern College, 1892-1992* (Collegedale, TN: Board of Trustees, Southern College of Seventh-day Adventists, 1992), 30.

4. Ibid.
5. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1905), 31; (1906), 29; (1907), 29; (1908), 75.
6. A picture of Miss Philmon and her intermediate school students is on Pettibone, 92.
7. Ibid., 41; Elva B. Gardner, *Southern Missionary College: A School of His Planning* revised by J. Mabel Wood. (Collegedale Tennessee: Southern Missionary College Board of Trustees, 1975), 307; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1913), 166; (1916), 183.
8. Pettibone, 48.
9. Ibid., 41.
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11. Norcliffe, 6.
12. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1920), 257.
13. Ibid., (1921), 17; (1922), 206; (1923), 206; (1924), 215; (1925), 230; (1926), 251.
14. Ibid., (1927), 266; (1928), 285; (1929), 294.
15. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Kilgore, Rochelle Philmon."
16. Ibid.; "Rochelle Philmon," accessed November 5, 2021, <https://ancestors.familysearch.org/en/KHDY-Q2S/rochelle-philmon-1887-1993>.
17. Pettibone, 31; "Charles Luther Kilgore," accessed November 14, 2021, <https://www.geni.com/people/Charles-Kilgore/6000000003816722693>;
"Robert Meek [sic] Kilgore," accessed November 14, 2021, <https://www.geni.com/people/Robert-Kilgore/6000000003816722984?through=6000000003816722693>.
18. Gardner, 307; Pettibone, 36.
19. "Letha Ethel Hall," accessed November 14, 2021, <https://www.geni.com/people/Letha-HALL/6000000003816722367?through=6000000003816722693#/tab/timeline>.
20. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1929), 25.
21. Norcliffe, 6; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1937), 229.

22. Myron F. Wehtje, *And There Was Light: A History of South Lancaster Academy, Lancaster Junior College, and Atlantic Union College* (South Lancaster, Massachusetts: The Atlantic Press, 1982), 236.
23. Randall Blackie and Neal Norcliffe, "Four Influential Women at AUC," *Adventist Heritage*, Spring 1994, 44.
24. Pettibone, 31; Author's recollections of conversations with former AUC students when he taught there.
25. Blackie and Norcliffe, 45.
26. Norcliffe, 6.
27. Ibid.; Blackie and Norcliffe, 44-45.
28. "Atlantic Union," *ARH*, March 13, 1958, 27; *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Kilgore, Rochelle Philmon."
29. "Meet the President," *Focus*, Spring 1984. Accessed October 12, 2021. <https://www.andrews.edu/president/history/lesher/docs/lesher-focus-welcome.pdf>.
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32. Blackie and Norcliffe, 44-45.
33. "Mrs. Rochelle Kilgore Honored," *Atlantic Union Gleaner*, January 27, 1976, 6.
34. Norcliffe, 6-7.
35. Branson, 58.

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