



Augusta and John Boehm

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Boehm, John Henry (1884–1975) and Augusta (1888–1967)

THE BRAZILIAN WHITE CENTER – UNASP

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John Henry and Augusta Boehm were educational pioneers in Brazil.

Early Years

John Henry Boehm was born February 1, 1884, in the city of Kutter, state of Saratov, near the Volga River, Russia. He was the second son of Henry Boehm (1857-1923) and Mary Boehm, from whose union were also born three daughters: Lizzie, Marie, and Charlotte.¹

John was the son of Germans who migrated to Russia searching for better opportunities. He was born and lived in Russia until the age of seven.² As the expectations that initially motivated his parents to move to Russia were not met, they returned to Germany and then went to the United States where the government offered housing and land to Europeans interested in colonizing the mid-west region of the country.³ When they arrived there in 1891,⁴ the Boehms went to the Immigration Department and were sent to the state of Kansas where, with other families, they founded a village of immigrants and began to cultivate wheat.⁵

Around 1896 an Adventist canvasser arrived in the village where they lived. In addition to his desire to present and sell publications, he was committed to developing a true friendship with the residents. He was always thoughtful, helping everyone he could in their day-to-day tasks. Through this missionary effort and testimony, one of the families became interested in the Adventist message and opened the doors of their home for weekly meetings that other villagers attended. It was through this evangelistic effort that the Boehm family knew and accepted the Adventist faith, becoming part of the new Adventist community founded in that locality.⁶

At John's house there weren't many regulations, but his parents demanded respect. They were understanding with their children and concerned about their physical, mental, and spiritual development. They had daily home worships and were regular at church services.⁷ Because the children of the Adventist families of the village where they lived were of school age, the local church built a building in which a new Adventist school was set up.⁸ There John attended elementary school and was positively impacted by his teacher who, in addition to the subjects of the school curriculum, also sought to inculcate Christian principles in the students, encouraging them to serve as missionaries in a foreign land in the future.⁹

As John grew up, he began to accompany his father on the farm. His activities were diverse, but the one he was most interested in was taming horses.¹⁰ Around this time John decided to date Augusta Schneider, a good Adventist lady and the daughter of close friends of the Boehm family whom he had known since childhood. At the time, she was studying pedagogy at Union College in Lincoln, Nebraska. She said she would only accept the proposal if John left the horse-taming and went to college to prepare to be a missionary. This was how John made the necessary preparations, and in 1905, at the age of 21, he studied theology¹¹ in the German department of Union College.¹²

Ministry

Augusta graduated with a degree in pedagogy in 1908, and she soon accepted an invitation to teach at the Adventist school of her church in Kansas. John graduated with a degree in theology the following year. They married in August 1909, before John finished college.¹³ Augusta was born December 27, 1888, in the city of Shaffer, Kansas.¹⁴ Throughout their married life she was a devoted wife and important companion in her husband's ministry. In 1912, with the intention of being more useful to the ministry, she also graduated with a degree in nursing from the college at Loma Linda, California. In the Brazilian mission field, she assisted John in the founding of the Adventist Seminary, the forerunner of the current Brazil College (UNASP-SP), where she served as nurse, dean, and kitchen supervisor. She was also an English teacher, dean, and musician at the Cruzeiro do Sul Adventist Academy (IACS). She served as a temporary teacher at an Adventist school in Serra Pelada, currently part of the city of Afonso Cláudio, in the state of Espírito Santo.¹⁵

After graduating from the theology course in 1910, John accepted the invitation to work as an assistant and as a Bible instructor in a series of public evangelism meetings held in a tent in the town of Redlands, near the town of Loma Linda.¹⁶ He stayed there until 1912, when he was transferred to the West Kansas Conference, where along with Pastor S. S. Shrock, he participated in another series of evangelistic meetings among the Germans of the southwest region of Shaffer, Kansas, which began on May 1 of the same year.¹⁷

Since they were young, John and Augusta had the desire to serve as Adventist missionaries, so they wrote a letter to the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists applying for this work.¹⁸ After the activities in Shaffer, the Boehm couple went to the Clinton German Seminary, located in the city of Clinton, Missouri, where they received the General Conference response, saying that their request had been received and that they were being assigned to serve as missionaries in Brazil, a country in which Augusta had wanted to serve since childhood. Before leaving the United States, the leadership of the denomination felt it necessary to ordain John to the pastoral ministry, which occurred on January 26, 1913, in Shaffer, Kansas.¹⁹

At that time there was no direct navigation line to Brazil. They embarked on a ship in New York City, around February 6, 1913, bound for London. From there they took another ship to Brazil, becoming the first missionaries sent by the West Kansas Conference. They arrived at the port city of Santos in the state of São

Paulo on March 1, 1913. They were met by Augusto Pages, treasurer of the Brazilian Publishing House and he led them to the publisher's headquarters in São Bernardo do Campo.²⁰

At this time, a canvasser providentially found a group of people in the city of Cosmópolis, in the countryside of the state of São Paulo, who through study of the Scriptures came to the conclusion that the Ten Commandments should still be observed. They prayed for three and a half years to be shown a church that also kept them. That was when the canvasser discovered them and asked the Brazilian Union for a pastor to assist them. Because John had just arrived and was available, he was sent along with the evangelical worker Germano Conrado to meet the new believers. They left São Paulo on a Friday, having the first meeting the same night with the group and some of their neighbors. They demonstrated a deep interest in the Adventist preaching and asked John to return on Saturday night and the following Sunday also.²¹

As soon as John returned to São Paulo on Monday morning, this group of believers chose a representative who went to the CPB headquarters to request of the Adventist church leaders that Boehm could return and maintain his work in Cosmópolis. It was promised that, as soon as possible, someone would be sent to assist them. But the man replied, "I will not go back until Mr. Boehm comes with me."²² Faced with such determination, the leaders granted John the credentials of an ordained minister and assigned him to work in that city.

A few months after this episode, 12 people were baptized, giving birth to the first Adventist group in Cosmópolis. The following year, 1914, John was transferred to the city of Nova Europa, a German colony in the countryside of the state of São Paulo, where he worked for about a year. There some young people accepted the Adventist message, among them Alfredo, Hebert, and Siegfried Hoffmann, who would later become Adventist seminary students. Due to this fact, John and his wife began to ponder the need to establish an SDA Brazilian educational institution to provide youth with a higher quality of Christian education that would enable them to serve the Church in different areas.²³

In 1915, biennials of the Paulista Mission occurred and the Boehm couple exposed this need to the leaders of the Brazilian Union. All agreed on the need to establish a new Adventist educational institution of higher learning; however, they said they did not have the necessary amount of money for the project. Under these circumstances, John and Augusta reflected on this and offered an inheritance that they would receive so that land could be bought. With this financial boost, a commission was arranged to look for a suitable place for the construction of a school. They found a good piece of land in Capão Redondo, located in the region of Itapeperica da Serra, in the city of São Paulo, belonging to the couple Pantaleão and Benedita Teisen. The farm was purchased and the foundation stone for the school was set on August 1, 1915.²⁴

John and his wife were directly involved in the challenging process of establishing this new institution, as there was nothing built on the property. John Lipke, the president of the Paulista Mission was appointed to be the director of the new institution. John was the founder of the project and with his building skills, he was commissioned to plan and execute the beginning of the new school.

On May 6, 1915, Boehm and his wife moved to the farm and took possession of it. The first structures were established with the help of the pioneer students. They built a central block for kitchen and dining room, and smaller ones for a dormitory.²⁵ Classes began on July 3, 1915.²⁶ John stayed as the building director of the college until June 12, 1918, completing three years and one month of service. During his time there he was responsible for establishing a physical and academic structure capable of housing about 80 young people in the boarding school, in addition to students who lived locally.²⁷

After leaving the administration of this institution, John was designated by the denomination to visit Adventist churches in the state of Paraná, which at the time did not have any active ordained ministers. He left for this mission on July 12, 1918, accompanied by Pastor Luiz Braun. During the period in which he was there, he officiated at baptisms and Communion services, seeking to strengthen the believers in this state. In July 1918 he also attended the Thirteenth Annual Conference of Santa Catarina Conference. At this conference he accepted a call to serve as a pastor in Santa Catarina Conference.²⁸

He worked there as a pastor for only a few months, until January 1919, when he was appointed the first president of the newly founded Espírito Santo Mission, based in the city of Vitória, capital of the state of Espírito Santo. He left for this new field of work on January 22, taking with him some of the first young people prepared by the Adventist Seminary, in view of the mission of establishing Adventism in the state capital.²⁹ He stayed at this mission until 1921, when he took a year's furlough. He traveled with his wife to the United States and returned to Brazil in September 1922, accompanied by C. C. Schneider's family, and soon he was president of the Espírito Santo Mission again.³⁰

At the end of 1923, John went through something unexpected while he was serving with Chester Schneider in the city of Rio de Janeiro. When he was walking up the stairs, he felt ill and could not continue. He sought out a physician and discovered that he suffered from heart failure. Given the serious situation, the physician and the church leaders advised him to go to the United States to be treated, along with his wife who was pregnant and suffering with malaria.³¹

John and Augusta went back to the United States to receive medical treatment at Washington Adventist Hospital and then they went to California where some of their relatives lived. They stayed there for six years until John fully recovered. During this period, he bought 16 acres of land and built a ranch on it. He also bought a pair of horses, a wagon, four cows, and started to work. During this time their second child, Harley, was born in July 1924. Their first child, who they had planned to name Oliver, was born when they were still in the city of Nova Europa, São Paulo state, but died right after birth.³²

Although they prospered in business, getting to the point of having 40 milk cows, John wanted to return to Brazil. As his health had improved, he asked the General Conference leaders to be sent back to ministry. He returned to Brazil in 1930 and again participated in ministerial activities in the state of Rio Grande do Sul. When he reached the state capital, Porto Alegre, he was given the mission of introducing Adventism to the city of

Passo Fundo. There he began evangelizing his neighbors by inviting them to Sabbath School classes held at his house. Soon results were seen and the first church was founded in the city. As he established Adventism there, John was transferred in 1931 to the city of Ijuí, with the purpose of continuing the missionary work in a German colony. In this town he and Ernesto Roth held public conferences which were welcomed by the population.³³

In February 1932, during a General Assembly of Rio Grande do Sul Conference, John was chosen to be president of this field. When he took over leadership of the conference, the administrative body was composed of only the treasurer and two other workers who were responsible for serving the entire state of Rio Grande do Sul. During his administration he promoted the idea of establishing more Adventist schools to prepare a new generation to serve the denomination. He also sought to direct several of the local school students to the Adventist Seminary. While he was in this position, he linked Cruzeiro do Sul Adventist Academy to the Adventist educational network. This institution had worked until then as a private school, belonging to Pastor Abraham C. Harder, who led it based on Adventist principles of education. He donated it to the Rio Grande do Sul Conference in 1937, and it officially became a denominational school.³⁴

Among his other contributions as president of the Rio Grande do Sul Conference are: the construction of 20 primary schools and an increase in the number of canvassers to 16.³⁵ John was president of this field until February 1940, when he was appointed to be president of the Rio-Minas Gerais Mission, where he maintained his deep concern for the education of Adventist youth.³⁶ After completing eight years of service in this field, he returned to the state of Espírito Santo where he served the last years of his ministry as an evangelist/pastor in the city of Vitória, which included the central churches of the cities of Vila Velha and Cariacica, and the groups meeting in Jardim América, Camboapina, and Ilha da Caieira. He continued in these activities until the beginning of 1954, when he retired after some 40 years of fruitful service to the Adventist Church.³⁷

Last Years

When he retired, John Boehm and his wife returned to the United States and settled near his sisters in the town of La Sierra, California. There he built a house and stayed physically active through the cultivation of fruit trees and a vegetable garden. Although he slowed down his ministry activities, he kept active in missionary work. He visited the needy and also assisted the Department of Social Welfare of the church he attended. He lived another 13 years with his wife, Augusta, until she died on April 14, 1967, at the age of 79, at the Loma Linda Adventist Hospital. John passed away on January 25, 1975, at the age of 91, after three years of hospitalization at the Loma Linda Adventist Hospital.³⁸

Contribution

John Boehm contributed greatly to the Adventist Church as a pastor, administrator, and promoter of education. As pastor, he was contributed to the establishment of the first group of Adventists in the cities of Cosmópolis

and Passo Fundo, located in the states of São Paulo and Rio Grande do Sul, respectively. As administrator, he stood out as a visionary leader. He was one of the people responsible for the establishment of the Brazilian Adventist Seminary, the first Adventist institution of higher education in Brazil. Besides, wherever he was, he promoted education—his great ideal. His goal was to open a school in each church. He can be recognized as one of the pioneers of Adventist education in Brazil.³⁹

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