

McKibbin, Alma Estelle (Baker) (1871–1974)

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Alma Estelle Baker McKibbin was a pioneering Adventist educator and author of the first Bible lesson textbooks for primary education.

Early Life

Alma was born November 26, 1871, in Webster County, Iowa, the firstborn child of Alonzo Lafayette Baker (1841-1927)¹ and Estella Antionette Tucker Baker (1851-1911).² They would later have two more daughters (Nellie Antionette Baker and Annie Elizabeth Baker Ireland), and a son (Alonzo Lafayette Baker).³ When she was six months old, her family traveled west to California and stayed with her father's relatives near Santa Rosa, some of whom had just become Seventh-day Adventists. Alma's mother heard J.N. Loughborough preach, and joined the church as well, but her father, an avowed atheist, moved his family away before his wife could be baptized.⁴

The Bakers settled in the small town of Saguache, Colorado, west of the San Luis Valley, and would see no more Adventists for several years. Her father hoped never to hear of the faith again and burned church publications when they arrived by mail. Still, Alma's mother strove to train her in the faith.⁵

When she started school her father told Alma she must study well so she could grow up to become a teacher. Her first teacher, though, an impatient man, berated her and threatened to make her wear a dunce cap, and she became convinced she couldn't learn. Fortunately, he was replaced by a new teacher, Miss Gould, who was gentle and encouraging, and Alma excelled at school thereafter, particularly at composition. She determined



Alma Estelle Baker.

From: Alonzo Baker, *My Sister Alma and I* (Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1980), at Archive.org.

that, like Miss Gould, she would love and nurture children. As she continued in school she studied her teachers' techniques to discover what worked, and what did not.⁶

Healdsburg College and Marriage

In the summer before her senior year of high school, two Adventist ministers, Charles P. Haskell and B. F. Stureman, came from Denver to hold meetings in Saguache.⁷ After struggling with a deep sense of sin, Alma experienced the relief of God's grace, and was baptized, along with her mother and grandmother. They became the core of a new Adventist church.⁸ Alma was appointed children's teacher in the new church, the first in a lifetime of teaching roles.

In the fall of 1889, Alma enrolled at Healdsburg College, the Adventist school in northern California, where she took the "normal" or teacher training course. Along with her college studies she took Bible worker's training, attempted colporteur, and managed children's Sabbath Schools through correspondence. She also formed an attachment to Edwin McKibbin (1866-1896),⁹ who finished his school course before her, and began teaching "in the preparatory department"¹⁰ at Healdsburg.

During her third year at Healdsburg she became so seriously ill that the doctor who examined her warned the college president, William C. Grainger, that she would die by morning.¹¹ Her health improved but only a very little as she continued to receive care in the Graingers' home over the next few weeks. Though they were not yet formally engaged, Edwin insisted that he wanted to marry her despite the illness. The wedding took place in the Graingers' living room in May 1892. Grainger first presented her with a diploma--the board had agreed to give credit for some of her outside work to compensate for the missed classes. Roderick S. Owen, Healdsburg Bible teacher, then presided over the marriage ceremony.¹² Alma's wedding trip was three blocks down the road, carried in a litter, to Edwin's home, where his sister Marian would keep house.

However, within a matter of months, the roles were reversed on the couple's health. Alma had a rapid recovery after a special prayer meeting that summer. Edwin was diagnosed with tuberculosis. Alma taught his classes for him that winter. The couple moved to southern California in 1894 to live with Edwin's relatives, where their infant son Lorin (1893-1894)¹³ died at 11 months old. Alma worked to support Edwin until his death on November 4, 1896.¹⁴

Educational Innovator

With no income and exhausted health, bereaved of her husband and son at age 25, Alma moved in with friends and began teaching their youngest children to read. Impressed with Ellen White's writings about holistic, Bible-based education, she started a home school. She then very reluctantly agreed to teach the eight-grade Centralia, California, church school the next year.

The conditions were daunting. The church had tried a school the year before, but this time wanted all the curriculum to be Bible-based, using no public school textbooks in any subject but math. The facilities were poor, the students were famously unruly, and the church member with whom she boarded actively tried to discourage her. McKibbin taught from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., then stayed up late writing the next day's lessons in her cold room. She was forced to take a six week break because of pneumonia and depression, and when she returned the board had run out of funds and could not pay her. She managed to complete the year, surviving on a diet of mostly walnuts.¹⁵

For this feat, Alma McKibbin is often called the first Adventist church school teacher in California. Since home schools and other church-sponsored schools had been tried already, it is more accurate to say she taught the first Adventist church school curriculum.

In the summer of 1899,¹⁶ Alma went to Healdsburg for a teacher's training institute to be conducted by M. E. Cady, the new president of the school. Eager to receive meaningful instruction, she arrived to find that Cady had to leave town on business and that she, as the only one present who had taught elementary school, was expected to teach the others. For 13 weeks she once again stayed up late at night, writing lessons to give the next day.¹⁷

McKibbin remained in Healdsburg as principal of the Healdsburg Preparatory School, connected with the education department of the college, beginning in the fall of 1899. During the summers she conducted teacher training institutes.¹⁸ Though she encouraged the other teachers to write their own Bible lessons, believing that Christian education "demands originality and independence of thought,"¹⁹ most found themselves incapable once in their teaching positions. Alma revised the Bible lessons initially developed in Centralia and first published them in 1903. The first edition was so urgently demanded that she printed and shipped each section as soon as it was written. These were known as the "shoe-string books," since recipients had to bind them themselves. Over the next years, while teaching full time, she wrote separate lessons for each grade, and continually revised them. Her books were used as Adventist Bible textbooks for more than 50 years.²⁰

In addition to her role as principal, McKibbin was slated to teach grades 1-4 at the Healdsburg school, but two weeks into the first year an emergency forced her to cover grades 5-8 with no advance notice. Adding to her responsibilities, her six-year-old brother Lonnie (Alonzo), along with her mother and grandmother, both of whom would require much care and attention due to failing health, came to live with her in California. Her father declared he no longer wished to stay with his wife and continued living in Colorado. Alma was now both caretaker and head of a household of four, still earning no more than the standard salary of a single woman--about \$270 per year.²¹

Relief finally arrived when one of Alma's sisters came to live with them, caring for the housebound women during the school day. The family also moved to a larger house, renting Ellen White's Healdsburg home for \$8

per month. White sometimes visited, enjoying the sight of the gardens and upgrades to the house, and conversing with McKibbin about her work. On one visit, she assured the family that rent could be waived if ever they came up short one month.²²

From Healdsburg to Angwin

After Healdsburg College closed in 1908, McKibbin declined an invitation to join the Pacific Union College (PUC) faculty, which opened in Angwin, California, in 1909. Her grandmother had by now passed away, but Alma's mother, who still lived with her, could not be accommodated in comfort on the undeveloped new campus. Alma stayed in Healdsburg for three years and led the local church, which was bereft of leadership when the college faculty moved away. Besides leading services, she visited members, settled disputes, and saw the church grow.²³ In 1911, Alma's mother passed away and her own health broke down, leading to a six-month stay at St Helena Sanitarium.²⁴

After her recuperation, McKibbin moved to Angwin in 1912 to teach Bible history--her favorite subject--at Pacific Union College. She rented a farmhouse and boarded her brother and his friend Ben Grant until they graduated. The famous 1918 influenza pandemic came to Angwin during the 1918-1919 school year and McKibbin contracted the virus three times, finally forcing her to retire at 48.

Mountain View Years

Reluctantly, she left the college on the mountain, and moved to the lower climate of Mountain View, California, in 1922, where her brother Alonzo Baker was by then working at Pacific Press as an editor.²⁵ McKibbin spent three years teaching Bible and Adventist history at Mountain View Academy during the 1920s before settling into real retirement.²⁶

She also took care of her father, who sent word in 1922 that he was at a veterans' home in Los Angeles and about to have a surgery which he might not survive. Alma went immediately to him and arranged his transfer to White Memorial Hospital, where an Adventist physician cared for him at no charge. She then cared for him in her home in Mountain View until his death in 1927. The man who had abandoned his family and scorned their faith now occasionally attended church, and said, "I used to hate Advents like rat poison; but now I think they are great, particularly my daughter Almee, and that Advent doctor in Los Angeles who saved my life."²⁷

Legacy

On April 9, 1942, Alma was the guest of honor at the dedication for McKibbin Hall, a new preparatory school building on the campus of Pacific Union College.²⁸ In 1957, she was a featured speaker for PUC's 75th anniversary.²⁹ In 1972, she received an honorary Doctor of Literature degree from PUC,³⁰ and the Adventist

educator's Medallion of Merit.³¹

On July 16, 1974, Alma Baker McKibbin died in her sleep. She was 103 years old. She was buried in Healdsburg, California, with her mother at her request.³² She had worked for the church 33 years, authored 15 books, most of them Bible textbooks,³³ and pioneered Adventist elementary education. In 1990, the North American Division established the Alma McKibbin Sabbatical Award for K-12 educators.³⁴

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4. Baker, *My Sister Alma and I*, 6.
5. Alma E. McKibbin, *Step by Step* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1964), 8, 9.
6. *Ibid*, 29.
7. Marie Louise Myers, "Historical/Analytical Study Of The Contributions Of Alma E. McKibbin To The Seventh-Day Adventist Church School System" (Ph.D. diss., Andrews University, 1992), 36.
8. Baker, 21-22
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10. McKibbin, *Step by Step*, 47.
11. *Ibid*, 45.
12. *Ibid*, 52.
13. "Alma Estelle Baker," *FamilySearch*.
14. McKibbin, *Step by Step*, 63.
15. Susie Myers, "A Woman's Struggle to Pioneer a Curriculum," *Adventist Heritage* 16 No. 3 (Spring 1995), 39.
16. Different sources list a different year in which McKibbin taught the Centralia school. In her autobiography, names it as the 1898-1899 school year (72). Baker's book sets it in 1897 (47). Later sources also vary, citing one or the other. As Cady's presidency of Healdsburg College began in 1899, this seems to be the correct date.
17. McKibbin, *Step by Step*, 77; Baker, *My Sister Alma and I*, 52-53.
18. Myers, "Historical/Analytical Study Of The Contributions Of Alma E. McKibbin," 158-164.

19. McKibbin, *Step by Step*, 77.
20. Myers, "A Woman's Struggle to Pioneer a Curriculum," 39.
21. McKibbin, *Step by Step*, 81-82; Baker, *My Sister Alma and I*, 54-57.
22. Baker, *My Sister Alma and I*, 63.
23. McKibbin, *Step by Step*, 90.
24. Ibid, 93.
25. Baker, *My Sister Alma and I*, 83. Some accounts have McKibbin remaining at PUC until 1922, but her autobiography reports that she 'wandered about for two years,' and settled in Mountain View in 1921; see McKibbin, *Step by Step*, 95.
26. Baker, *My Sister Alma and I*, 90.
27. Ibid.
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