



Ross and Mabel James (seated)

Photo courtesy of Adventist Heritage Centre, South Pacific Division.

James, Joseph Ross (1895–1988) and Mabel Laurella Margaret (Reekie) (1895–1963)

W. GLYNN LITSTER

W. Glynn Litster, Ph.D. (The University of Newcastle, Newcastle, New South Wales, Australia), retired in 1994. Litster was born in Melbourne, Australia, and served as an educator and missionary in the South Pacific Division of Seventh-day Adventists. His roles included teacher, principal, school supervisor, and education director. Late in his career he researched the history of Sanitarium. During retirement he produced Pacific Islands hymnbooks in 7 languages. He is married to Elva, has two adult children, 6 grandchildren, and 3 great grandchildren.

Joseph and Mabel James worked as missionaries in Vanuatu.

Early Years¹

Joseph Ross James was born in Ballarat, Victoria, on January 10, 1895.² He accepted the message of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in 1911.³ He attended the Pukekura Training School, New Zealand, from 1908 to 1910, he then transferred to the Australian Missionary College at Cooranbong New South Wales, studying there in 1911 and 1912.⁴ He then enrolled in the nurses training course at the Sydney Sanitarium at Wahroonga and graduated in 1914. In 1915 he was back at the Australasian Missionary College before serving as a colporteur and in evangelistic work in the Victorian Conference in 1916.⁵

Mabel Laurella Margaret Reekie was born in Perth, Western Australia, on July 25, 1895.⁶ She was the daughter of Frederick William Reekie and Marion Reekie (Lowrie). Her father was a literature evangelist. She had an older sister Jesse. A younger sister and a younger brother both died in infancy. Another younger brother Clifton, was adopted a short time after the infant son Fred Balfour Reekie had died. After completing her schooling, Mabel enrolled at the Australasian Missionary College, Cooranbong, New South Wales where she studied business.⁷

Ross and Mabel met while they were students at the Australasian Missionary College. On November 18, 1916, Ross James and Mabel Reekie were married at the bride's home in Cooranbong.⁸ The next day Ross and Mabel sailed to New Hebrides on the *Induna*. The trip took a number of weeks with the ship calling at Lord Howe Island and Norfolk Island on the way.⁹ The couple eventually arrived at the small island of Atchin just off the northeast coast of Malekula where the Seventh-day Adventist mission had established its headquarters in the New Hebrides [now Vanuatu]. As a qualified nurse, Ross combined medical work with evangelism working on the island of Malekula among the Big Nambus people. He established a presence in the village of Matanavath, conducting a school and visiting villages further along the coast.¹⁰

Their First Mission Station—at Big Bay, Santo

While Norman and Alma Wiles continued to work among the Big Nambus on west Malekula, Andrew Stewart, the mission superintendent, and Ross James toured around the large island of Santo, to the north of Malekula, trying to find a suitable location for a new mission station. On the northern part of the island, the Portuguese navigator, Decuros had landed and called the island "Australia del Espiritu Santo" meaning the southern land of the Holy Spirit. The bay was later aptly named "Big Bay." Into this bay, Stewart and James sailed and found a trader, Mr Fish, who offered them an attractive 80 acres of land at an attractive price. A feature of this property was an easy access to the hinterland. The men hurried back to Atchin in order to prepare to transport building materials, tools and personal effects to Big Bay. The move to Big Bay was made in July 1919.¹¹ On arrival Ross and Mabel were offered the use of the home of Mr Fish until they could build the mission house. The building work was done with the help of men brought from Atchin, using trees from the land and axes they had brought

with them

Ross and Mabel James soon attempted to contact the nearest village. The reaction of the villagers was to flee into the bush. The only person they found was an old man who had worked on a plantation and knew pidgin English. Later, Ross discovered that the people used a sign language which, after some time, he and Mabel acquired.

In 1921 Ross and Mabel took their furlough. They returned to Big Bay and worked there for the next five years until their second furlough.¹² On returning to Australia, Ross James was ordained at Wahroonga on January 29, 1926. Soon after he and Mabel were given the privilege of attending the 1926 General Conference in Wisconsin. While in the United States Ross studied tropical medicine at Loma Linda University. Also while there, their first child, Ray, was born on August 11, 1926. Six weeks after Ray was born they returned to the New Hebrides. A few months after returning Ross was appointed the Superintendent of the Church in New Hebrides, a position he held from 1927 until 1929.¹³ While Superintendent, Ross established the school at Aore Island and moved the mission headquarters from Atchin to that site.¹⁴ At the end of 1929 the family was invited to relocate to Papua so they left the New Hebrides after 13 years' service and returned to Sydney. While in Sydney, on January 21, 1930, their second son, Ian, was born.

Late in 1929, Pastor Ross James was invited to connect temporarily with the Papuan mission as a relieving worker for the Vilirupu mission station on the Papuan coast about 200 miles west of Port Moresby.¹⁵ He was there without his family for several months until Charles and Evelyn Mitchell returned from Australia. In a decision made at the Union Conference Session in September 1930, the James family was asked to work in Tasmania during the summer months.¹⁶ It would seem that this decision was taken because they were expecting to return to New Hebrides. Instead, their next move was to Aroma on the Papuan coast, about 100 miles east of Port Moresby.¹⁷ Here their third child, Rosma, was born November 18, 1932. Ross not only worked at Aroma, he travelled inland and along the coast meeting with many of the villagers.

The Later Years

The family returned to Australia in 1936, where they settled in Shepparton, Victoria doing pastoral work. In 1941 they were invited to engage in pastoral work in the northern part of North New South Wales Conference. In 1945, the family moved to the United States. Ross took up employment at the St Helena Hospital in Northern California as a nurse. After Mabel died on September 29, 1963, Ross was invited into pastoral work in the Florida Conference. He married Myrtle Camp on May 31, 1964, and together they cared for the Lake Fort Worth Church in Florida. They then moved west to pastor the Norgales Church in Arizona, followed by the Yerington and South Lake Tahoe churches in the Nevada/Utah Conference. They finally retired in Sutter Creek, California, where Ross James died on March 3, 1988.

SOURCES

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- Joseph Ross James Biographical Blank. South Pacific Division Archives. Folder: Joseph Ross James. Document: "Biographical Information Blank."
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- "On Sunday, November 18, Miss Mabel Reekie ..." *Australasian Record*, December 3, 1917.
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NOTES

1. Much of the data in this biography is from the personal knowledge of the author, a nephew of Joseph and Mabel James.
2. Joseph Ross James Biographical Information; South Pacific Division of the General Conference Archives; Folder: "James, Joseph Ross;" Document: "Biographical Information Blank."
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.
 6. Ibid.
 7. Personal knowledge of the author, a nephew of Joseph and Mabel James.
 8. "On Sunday, November 18, Miss Mabel Reekie . . .," *Australasian Record*, December 3, 1917, 8.
 9. "From Vila, New Hebrides, Brother J. R. James writes . . .," *Australasian Record*, January 28, 1918, 8.
 10. A. G. Stewart, "The Malakulan Front," *Australasian Record*, May 6, 1918, 2.
 11. A. G. Stewart, "Our Work in the New Hebrides," *Australasian Record*, December 22, 1919, 2 - 3.
 12. "Writing in a personal letter on October 10, from Santo . . .," *Australasian Record*, December 1, 1924, 8.
 13. A. G. Stewart, "A Visit to the New Hebrides Mission Field - Part 1," *Australasian Record*, February 7, 1927, 8.
 14. J. R. James, "Aore, New Hebrides, the Site of Our New Training School," *Australasian Record*, March 7, 1927, 3- 4.
 15. "Owing to the absence of Pastor Lock from Papua and . . .," *Australasian Record*, December 9, 1929, 8.
 16. "That Pastor and Mrs J. R. James make Tasmania their field . . .," *Australasian Record*, September 29, 1930, 24.
 17. "Pastor and Mrs J. R. James and their two little boys sailed . . .," *Australasian Record*, December 14, 1931, 8; "Pastor J. R. James wrote from Aroma, Papua, on . . .," *Australasian Record*, January 18, 1932, 8.
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