

Laird, Percival John (1871–1947) and Emma Athalia Perrine-Laird, M.D. (1867–1955)



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Early Adventist missionaries to China, the Lairds combined evangelistic and medical missionary work together. The work they developed in Chang-sha was considered as “strategically important” to the early development of Adventism in China.¹ Percival’s Chinese name is: (pinyin: Lài Y dé); Emma’s Chinese name is: (pinyin: Lài Y dào).

Background

Emma was born on February 13, 1867, in Lick Creek Township in Iowa to Samuel (1820-1896) and Fildelia née Shankland (1823-1873) Perrine. She trained as a physician at the American Medical Missionary College in Chicago. Later, she practiced medicine at Battle Creek Sanitarium and then at the Des Moines Sanitarium. In 1905, she accepted a call from the Foreign Mission Board to serve as a medical missionary in Japan at the Kobe Sanitarium.

Percival John Laird

Photo courtesy of goofygep76. Source: *Find a Grave*, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/116879632/percival-john-laird>. Shared by *Adventism in China Digital Image Repository*.

Percival was born on October 5, 1871, in Windsor, England. Prior to 1900, he was employed by Scotland Yard. At the turn of the century, he abandoned police work to become a missionary for the London Missionary Society (Church of England) in 1900.² Here he mastered Mandarin. At some point he was instructor to two famous Chinese revolutionary leaders, Dr. Sun Yat-sen (1866-1925) and Dr. Wellington Koo (1888-1985).³ Around 1906, he met F. A. Allum in Hong Kong while passing through. Allum noted how he was impressed with both his missionary experience and his “intention” of becoming a Seventh-day Adventist.⁴ Later, he noted that although Percival “has been in the truth but a short time,” he is “quite a capable young man, and . . . will make a good worker.”⁵

Mission Service in China

Emma and Percival were married on September 6, 1906, in Osaka, Japan.⁶ By October 1, after their marriage ceremony, they arrived in Honan [Hunan], China, to start a mission station. This was “the last province of China to open to gospel effort.” They established a mission station at Changsha, China. “So many students were inquiring if we would open classes in English that we took this as evidence of divine leading.”⁷ On January 26, 1907, 27 students enrolled. An early visit by Orvie J. Gibson noted that they were successfully holding English classes.⁸ Initially, they had planned to go farther inland but were “obliged to get a small house” while they waited for “the arrival of our freight.”⁹

The Adventist mission was situated near nine or ten other mission stations. Initially there was some tension among the other Christian missionaries because these newcomers were “heretics” who kept the “Jewish Sabbath.” Nine workers from four missions sent a delegation that led to a visit to their mission. Percival gave them a Bible study about the Sabbath.¹⁰ Emma assisted a Moravian woman at a Norwegian clinic occasionally. Eventually, they opened the two front rooms of their home nearest to the street for the public. Emma used one room as her clinic, and in the other room, Percival held “public services” every evening where anywhere from 15 to 150 attended.¹¹ “All he has to do is to open the door and sing a song, and he has a crowd of attentive listeners every evening,” wrote Emma.¹²

The couple described their early struggles with various issues ranging from treating opium overdoses¹³, treating girls whose feet had been bound, and misconceptions about their missionary work. Percival opined about mean-spirit foreigners who gave missionaries a bad reputation (“foreign devils”) and a woman who brought her daughter for treatment, but eventually the family pressured them to send her away to a distant village to be treated by “a Chinese quack” doctor.¹⁴

Their first convert, Alexander, was their language teacher. Soon they had seven converts including another Protestant missionary,¹⁵ although this missionary soon afterward repudiated his faith. Meanwhile, Percival worked on “translating some of our literature for tracts.”¹⁶ Unfortunately, the low river levels prevented steamers from going up and down the river. This meant that initially they thought they would miss the pivotal

1907 missionary council (with W. W. Prescott).¹⁷ Upon further inquiry, they found a “small steam launch” that was traveling third-class that in turn made it possible for them to attend this missionary gathering. They glowed at the opportunity to share their faith along the journey. They printed a series of tracts including the evil effects of tobacco smoking, “Signs for Good and Evil” and “No One Cares for My Soul.” They also started work on translating a tract on “The Nature of Man.” They were able to pass out or sell about 100 tracts per day.¹⁸

Percival warned against giving directly to individual missionaries. One of the strengths of the Seventh-day Adventist Church has been the work of the General Conference to be “in such direct touch with all branches of the work the world over” to ascertain “the general needs” above that of “an ordinary individual.”¹⁹ Unfortunately, their former convert spread rumors about them, in particular, that they advocated that one had to keep the seventh-day Sabbath in order to be saved. This prejudice led to their helper, Chang Kang Heo, being expelled from the Chinese Christian Union because of his association with the Lairds.²⁰ Percival found comfort in the persistence of Nehemiah. He shared one instance of persecution while distributing Adventist literature:

I was out on a book-selling trip in Kuangsi, alone as to foreigners, and of the coolies all were practically strangers to me and to the place. While dinner was preparing, some books were taken on the street, for sale. I had not been out long when the Chinese crowd suddenly took up the cry of an opium fiend, and shouted, “Kill the foreign devil! Kill!” It is one thing to write these words, but quite a different experience to hear them. As the crowd closed in around me, “God help me!” I cried, in my distress. As I turned around, the people stood back on each side, and allowed me to pass. Believe God answers prayer? It has been proven that he does.²¹

As they learned about the culture and institutions, they began to look for ways to reach the people. They especially noted that the most significant belief to share was “the dead know not anything.”²² Emma noted the fluctuating exchange rates and the need to keep funds in different currencies. They used local furniture in their home, signaling an embrace of the culture. Emma especially admired the birds in their midst since she was one of the few early Adventist missionaries who had developed a love for bird watching.²³ Furthermore, despite some uprisings that resulted in hangings of “rebels” near their home, they felt that there “is nothing to fear for the foreigners.”²⁴ As things calmed down, Percival went on an eighteen-day trip to the east of Chang-sha and sold 3,000 tracts.²⁵ The following year he was joined by Chang Kang Heo, who was one of two Chinese colporteurs who worked closely with the Lairds.²⁶ Percival also noted an unnamed friend from his earlier mission work who converted to Adventism.²⁷

In May 1908, the Lairds were reinforced by Roy F. (1878-1970) and Myrtie (1878-1967) Cottrell and Pauline Schilberg (1882-1952).²⁸ The Lairds also noted a Chinese woman, who had the unusual honor of being a school teacher, who joined them. The Lairds were happy to report that a young man trained as a teacher, Lü Chuanleo from the Methodist Episcopal Mission, converted and began to work as a canvasser. Shih Ting-chen, their translator who was reluctant to become Adventist due to persecution, eventually joined their ranks and wrote a tract “confuting the argument that man has an immortal soul.”²⁹ Likewise, Ho Chintsin, an English teacher who

studied with the Lairds each day, helped them translate tracts. Ho and Lü worked with Percival to study Ellen White's books *Christ's Object Lessons*, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, *Christ our Saviour*, and a collection of Scripture readings. These attempts to translate Ellen White's writings, with the exception of the work by Abram La Rue and Jacob N. Anderson to translate a few chapters in *Steps to Christ*, were really some of the most significant and substantial attempts to translate Ellen White's writings into Mandarin.³⁰ Specifically, Emma credited Ho Chintsin with the first translation of Ellen White's books, *Christ's Object Lessons* and *Ministry of Healing*, into Mandarin.³¹

Our Bible classes, although they may not reach a high average, certainly are stirring the hearts of men who attend. All these men can read and write well. Better still, they give their testimony before others.... This work and the translating take up our time so fully that we do not put in many hours at school teaching English. To supply our wants, wooden blocks are being carved, from which tracts are being printed. This method has the merit of being cheap and takes up none of our time; for the original is given to the carver, and he returns a block and as many tracts as we request.³²

By early 1909, Percival went on another book-selling trip to the Siang Valley, Hunan, in which he sold 4,791 tracts.³³ With other missionaries, they shared tips on how to overcome extreme heat in tropical areas while minimizing exposure to malaria.³⁴ They also began to itinerate into the surrounding region more. In the summer of 1909, they spent six weeks in the highlands of Linyang, where they had three people "deeply interested in the truth."³⁵ Emma made a special point to invite women to her home two afternoons each week for Bible study, prayer, and singing.³⁶ Emma later reflected that one of the highlights of her missionary work in China was teaching women to read.³⁷

Riots, Furlough, and Later Years

In April 1910, riots occurred in Chang-sha during which every mission station in the city was burned to the ground. Some 41 missionaries, including the Lairds, barely escaped with their lives.³⁸ "God intervened in a marked manner to save the lives of our workers there," wrote W. A. Westworth, "and for this we can not praise him enough. As the result of the terrible strain of that time, all foreign help is now withdrawn from this most important city."³⁹ Percival noted that things deteriorated on April 13 when they noticed a mob as they returned to their home. That night, at 2 a.m., a mob was demanding rice from across the street. "We saw how imminently dangerous our situation was, and how helpless we were should they decide to attack us."⁴⁰ Without a rear exit, they were trapped. The next morning, from the rooftop, they could see other mission buildings on fire. That evening, a military official with four unarmed soldiers came to take them away. They had to leave all their belongings behind.⁴¹ Percival recounted:

So we had a short farewell meeting with the Chinese brethren, urging one another to be faithful to the message at all costs. Then, having given them instruction in case they had to flee, and handing them all the spare money we had except a dollar and a few small coins, we left the house. The brethren accompanied us to the inner gate, leading to the city wall, where we said "good-bye." Tears filled their eyes and ours as we parted, not knowing whether we should meet again on earth.⁴²

Their friend took them to a military barracks three miles away and then on to the British consulate, where they boarded a British steamer. After gunboats arrived on April 16, Percival was able to return to the mission to find that it had been ransacked. His appearance surprised his friends back at the mission, and he spent the night there. The next morning, he returned to the boat only to learn that his life was still in danger and that there had been signs across the city calling everyone "to massacre all foreigners."⁴³

Afterwards, the General Conference Committee approved their furlough on July 1, 1910.⁴⁴ They went to the St. Helena Sanitarium where they stayed to recuperate.⁴⁵ Meanwhile, back in Chang-sha, J. J. Westrup was able to visit the old mission compound, have it repaired for about \$100, and encourage the workers there.⁴⁶ Subsequently, after a visit by I. H. Evans and Dr. A. C. Selmon, a revival took place in Chang-sha. It was reported that an average of 75 persons participated in daily Bible study showing the fruits of these pioneer missionaries.⁴⁷

At the end of their furlough, the China Mission, for unknown reasons, requested "that they do not wish" for them to "return to that field."⁴⁸ The church continued to pay their furlough salary until November 1911 to help them find a place to work.⁴⁹ During this furlough, they visited several Adventist colleges, camp meetings, and churches to help promote Adventist missions in China.⁵⁰

In 1911, Emma worked as a physician at Hinsdale Sanitarium. By 1918, the Lairds settled near Paw Paw, Michigan, where Percival ran an interior decorating store and Emma began a private medical practice.⁵¹ She occasionally returned to assist with the Hinsdale Sanitarium. Percival passed away on April 11, 1947, in Paw Paw, Michigan. After Percival's death, Emma remained in Paw Paw until 1951 when she moved to Ohio to be closer to her family. She passed away on September 12, 1955, in Massillon, Ohio, and was buried alongside of her husband at Wildey Cemetery in Paw Paw.⁵²

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2. See news report, *ARH*, November 15, 1906, 24.
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4. F. A. Allum, "Canton," *Australasian Union Record*, July 23, 1906, 4.
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7. P. J. Laird, "China," *The Present Truth*, June 13, 1907, 379.
8. Orvie J. Gibson, "China: A Day at the Chang Sha Mission Station," *The Welcome Visitor*, July 10, 1907, 2, 3.
9. "Changsha, Hunan, China," *The Workers' Bulletin*, January 29, 1907, 120 (reprinted in *Life and Health*, May 1907, 139, 140).
10. P. J. Laird, "China," *The Present Truth*, June 13, 1907, 379.
11. "Changsha, Hunan, China," *The Workers' Bulletin*, January 29, 1907, 120 (reprinted in *Life and Health*, May 1907, 139, 140).
12. Emma Perrine-Laird, "In the new Province of Hunan, China," *ARH*, February 7, 1907, 13-14.
13. Percival J. Laird, "Medical Work in Heathen Lands," *Life and Health*, October 1909, 621-622. He noted in this article the recipe that they used to treat opium overdoses: "RX. ¼ oz. dried ginger; 1 oz. walnuts; 3 each, of male and female grasshoppers; 2 each, of male and female salted lizards; 2 oz. snake soaked in rice whisky; 2 oz. black dates; ½ oz. rusty iron; ½ oz. bark of elm tree; ½ oz. hartshorn; ¼ oz lotus leaves. This is boiled down together in plenty of water until there is enough to fill a rice bowl. To be taken in one dose."
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15. Emma A. Laird, "Changsha, Hunan, China," *The Workers' Bulletin*, April 16, 1907, 162, 163.
16. Emma A. Laird, "China," *ARH*, March 14, 1907, 17.
17. W. W. Prescott, "Editorial Letter: Jottings from the Editor's Note-Book," *ARH*, May 16, 1907, 3.
18. Percival J. Laird, "China," *ARH*, April 2, 1908, 17.
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23. Emma A. Laird, "Our Bird Neighbors in China," *YI*, August 31, 1909, 9-10.
24. Emma A. Laird, "Changsha, Hunan, China," *The Workers' Bulletin*, April 16, 1907, 162, 163.

25. Percival J. Laird, "The Gospel in Chinese Mandarin," *The Present Truth*, October 8, 1908, 651-652.
26. P. J. Laird, "China," *ARH*, January 9, 1908, 18.
27. Ibid.
28. See announcement, *ARH*, June 11, 1908, 24; R. F. Cottrell, "From Seattle to Chang-Sha," *ARH*, July 2, 1908, 12.
29. P. J. Laird, "The Work in Hunan, China," *ARH*, September 3, 1908, 12.
30. Ibid.
31. Emma A. Laird, "One Day at Our Chang-sha Dispensary," January 1909, 42-44.
32. P. J. Laird, "Chang-Sha," *ARH*, March 5, 1908, 19, 20.
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35. P. Laird, "Medical Missionary Work in China," *The Missionary Worker*, November 10, 1909, 180-181.
36. Emma P. Laird, "Work Among Women and Children: Home Life in Chang-Sha, the Center of the Recent Uprising," *ARH*, November 3, 1910, 8.
37. She stated: "Very few of the women in China know how to read the [Chinese] characters. After the first year I began to teach the women. Of course we had our helpers' wives, our evangelist's wife and teachers, and we had them invite their friends and relatives, and they came and brought their children." Emma P. Laird, "In China's Interior," *The Life Boat*, July 1911, 198.
38. "The Dangers of Foreign Mission Work," *The Life Boat*, May 1910, 163-164.
39. W. A. Westworth, "China," *ARH*, August 25, 1910, 9, 10.
40. P. J. Laird, "The Chang-Sha (China) Riot," *ARH*, October 13, 1910, 8.
41. Ibid.
42. Ibid.
43. Ibid., 9.
44. General Conference Committee Minutes, July 1, 1910, 250.

45. See announcement in *The Workers' Bulletin*, July 26, 1910, 4.
46. J. J. Westrup, "Hunan, China," *ARH*, December 1, 1910, 11.
47. Percival J. Laird, "Good Tidings from Chang-sha, China," *ARH*, June 15, 1911, 16.
48. General Conference Committee Minutes, March 27, 1911, 369.
49. General Conference Committee Minutes, October 31, 1911, 121.
50. See the note about their visit to Union College. Also, check out the opening page of news items featured in *The Educational Messenger*, January 26, 1911, 1.
51. *The Life Boat*, October 1918, 315; P. J. Laird, "The Drug Habit of the Chinese," *Life and Health*, December 1907, 389-390.
52. <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/116879632/percival-john-laird> and <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/116879671/emma-athalia-laird> [accessed 4/24/23]. Also note that the birth year in Findagrave.com for Percival was recorded as 1874, which conflicts with all U.S. and British census and birth records where the birth year was noted as 1871. Therefore, it appears to be a typo on his tombstone. For a complete list of genealogical records, see: <http://www.ancestry.com/family-tree/tools/tree/186772225/invitees/accept?inviteId=8ac68910-4f49-4a3e-8e58-28f746085a99> [accessed 4/24/23].

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