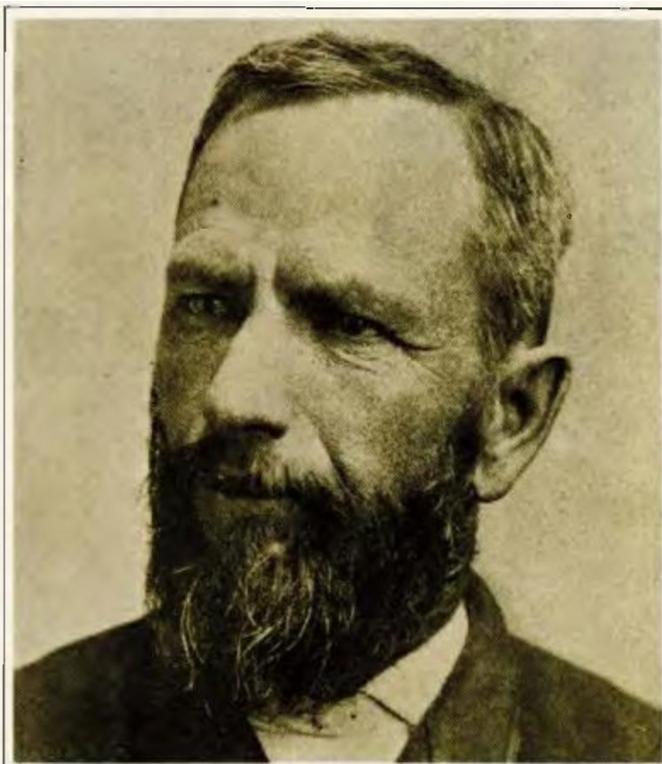


Hill, William Bancroft

(1843–1905)

BRIAN E. STRAYER

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W. B. Hill

courtesy: Loma Linda University Heritage Room

William Bancroft Hill was a pioneering evangelist in the American upper Midwest.

Early Life

William Bancroft Hill was born January 25, 1843, in Ontario, Canada, to Walter Hill and Phebe (Brown) Hill, both Friends (Quakers). They had four more sons and two daughters whose names are not known. William attended Quaker meetings and played with Quaker and Native American children. He enjoyed fishing in the Sable River and shooting wild pigeons, partridges, squirrels, raccoons, and deer. He helped clearing the forest, planting crops, logging, and was involved in community activities, such as corn-husking and apple-paring bees, house raisings, and maple sugaring.

Hill attended a log cabin school where he excelled at spelling bees and debates against pupils from rival schools. He joined the Dialectic Society to hone his public speaking skills, but withdrew from the Singing Society because he could not carry a tune. He also enjoyed attending temperance and phrenology meetings. In 1856 William's mother died and his father remarried. When William turned fifteen, his father taught him the cobbler's trade.

Seeing the effects of intemperance around him, William resolved never to drink alcohol. He joined the Good Templars and began giving temperance lectures. In 1863 he moved to northern Michigan, joined the Methodist Episcopal Church, and chaired temperance and prayer meetings for them. To earn a living, Hill ran logs on Michigan's rivers and worked in sawmills. When his parents moved to Minnesota in 1865, William joined them,

William B. Hill

Photo courtesy of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Archives.

earning money by harvesting grain and chopping wood.

In 1867, after attending meetings led by W. S. Ingraham (1821-1874), William joined the Seventh-day Adventist Church.¹ While teaching in a country school, he fell in love with one of his students. On March 22, 1869 Hill married Emma Town, and together they raised seven children and farmed while he taught in rural schools. In the spring of 1873 they moved to Blue Earth City, Minnesota. That summer, Dudley M. Canright issued William a ministerial license to preach.

Itinerant Evangelism

As an itinerant evangelist, Hill usually preached alone, traveling by train, horse, wagon, and foot all over southern Minnesota. His two autobiographies graphically describe the challenges he faced. Given the lack of roads at the time, Hill endured frequent wagon and buggy accidents. He also faced opposition from the Methodists, Episcopalians, Universalists, Disciples of Christ, Spiritualists, Christian Scientists, and Latter Day Saints (Mormons) who challenged him to doctrinal debates. He faced attacks by wild dogs and confronted rowdies who whipped him and threatened to tear his tent to shreds.

Inclement weather made his life difficult as well. Depending on the season, he forded ice-choked rivers; faced fierce rainstorms, hail, and tornado-like winds; tramped through knee-high snowdrifts; and endured blistering summer heatwaves. He was occasionally afflicted with illnesses such as diphtheria and typhoid fever. Hill met these challenges with prayer, fasting, and hydrotherapy. As fruits of his evangelism, he baptized scores of converts and established several new churches during the 1870s. In the spring of 1874 he built a new house at Grove Lake near the church he had established.

As the family grew, Hill supplemented his income by teaching school and harvesting grain during the summers. Attending camp meetings required the use of four covered wagons to hold all the cooking and sleeping gear for the family. In the summer of 1876, James White (1821-1881) and Uriah Smith (1832-1903) ordained Hill to the gospel ministry at the Eagle Lake, Minnesota, camp meeting.

In the winter of 1876-77, Hill preached in western Wisconsin, where he baptized forty converts, facing strong opposition from hecklers interrupting his meetings, a bully threatening him with a shillelagh, and constant opposition from Spiritualists and Disciples of Christ ministers. Despite these challenges, Hill forged ahead, holding evangelistic meetings, organizing Sabbath schools, establishing new churches, and entering into doctrinal debates with his opponents.

In the spring of 1879 Hill moved his family to northwestern Iowa. Here he frequently slept along the road and occasionally got lost on the prairie. Here also he buried his eldest son Gordon who died of diphtheria.

Health Crisis and Renewed Labors

Bone weary from incessant labor, for two years (1882-1884) Hill took a break from tent evangelism to oversee seven congregations in Iowa. In 1884, suffering from an injured back and a persistent cold, Hill entered Battle Creek Sanitarium for two months of treatments, including warm, cold, and electric baths; vigorous rubdowns with salt ("salt glows") and ointments; and the removal of a growth in his nose.

Hill became the chaplain of the Sanitarium, sharing morning and evening talks in the parlor, giving patients Bible studies, and counseling them. He also preached at the Dime Tabernacle and attended the General Conference session.

After his recovery, he returned to Minnesota as the only German-speaking minister in the Conference to preach and teach school in the Eagle Lake area (1884-1887). During the late 1880s, for the first time in his career, Hill held tent meetings with partners: A. H. Vankirk in 1887-88 and Hultreich Graf in 1889-90.

Absent from his family for months at a time, Hill often felt lonely and sometimes despondent. By 1892 he was supervising fifteen congregations in northwestern Minnesota. When influenza nearly killed him in 1892, he was heartened to learn that his father had become a Seventh-day Adventist.

In the fall of 1892 Hill moved to North Dakota where he faced the coldest weather he had ever experienced (-52° F.). While giving Bible studies by potbellied stoves in rural shanties, he faced fierce blizzards, frequent whiteouts, and occasional frostbite. Returning to Minnesota in 1894, he escaped a forest fire, survived a train wreck, and disciplined a woman who danced polkas at his meetings. Transferred to Nebraska in 1897, he faced furnace-like heatwaves, bloodthirsty clouds of mosquitoes, and stampeding horses. There he buried his son Willie who died of cerebral meningitis.

Confrontational Style

As a preacher, Hill excelled at delivering what nineteenth-century ministers called "discourses": lengthy, hard-hitting, Bible-oriented lectures that focused on Adventist doctrines. One of his favorite devices was to ask attendees to stand if they believed in the Ten Commandments. Once they had stood, he asked them why they did not keep the fourth commandment which stated that the seventh day (Saturday) was the Lord's Sabbath and not Sunday. This confrontational style amused some but offended others. It also set the stage for debates (both in English and German) with local ministers on the state of the dead, Sabbath/Sunday issues, and whether the law had been abolished at the cross—contests at which Hill excelled.

In his published autobiographies, Hill expresses strong dislike for Adventist "drones" (those not actively working to convert souls), his hatred of the Roman Catholic Church (for supporting Senator Blair's national Sunday bill in 1888), and his firm belief that signs in nature, disturbing international events, and corruption in American politics foretold the imminent second coming of Christ.

Later Life

In 1899 Hill traveled to South Lancaster, Massachusetts, as a delegate from Nebraska to the General Conference session. After returning to Nebraska, he held evangelistic tent meetings with a team that by 1900 included two men and a woman Bible workers. The team faced opposition from Disciples of Christ ministers, and cyclone winds snapped the tent poles. Suffering from neuralgia, Hill moved to northeastern Nebraska in 1901. After hot fomentation treatments restored him to health, he resumed his tent meetings, often taking Beulah, his nine-year-old daughter, with him.

In 1902 Hill was invited to teach a class to student colporteurs at a Bible Institute held at Union College in Lincoln, Nebraska, after which he attended the district gathering of Church workers in Kansas. Somewhat unusual among Adventist ministers, Hill also preached to what he called “the dusky Indians and mixed bloods” on the Omaha tribal reservation in June 1902. As late as 1903 at sixty, Hill, with a team of four men and two women (a Bible worker and an organist), was still holding tent meetings. He also occasionally taught the church school in College View, Nebraska.

But in 1904, suffering from tuberculosis, Hill went to Boulder, Colorado, to receive treatments at the Adventist sanitarium there. While recovering he wrote a pamphlet, “Brother Hill’s Bible Class.” Returning to College View, Nebraska, he suffered a relapse and died of TB in the Nebraska Sanitarium on May 4, 1905 at the age of 62, leaving his wife Emma and seven children. Elder J. J. Graf, one of his early converts, preached the funeral sermon on May 7. Hill was buried in the College View cemetery.

Hill closed his 1902 autobiography with these words: “For many years I have been marching under the banner of the great Prince. I have seen something of storm and battle. I have seen something of the goodness of the Lord...I have found Jesus a comfort in sorrow, a refuge from the storm, a very present help in time of trouble...”²

Contribution

As an itinerant evangelist, William Bancroft Hill helped establish Adventism on a firm foundation throughout the Plains region of Minnesota, Iowa, Nebraska, and North Dakota at the end of the nineteenth century. The litany of the challenges--religious, climate, and physical--he faced was probably typical of most nineteenth century pioneer preachers.

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NOTES

1. W. B. Hill, *Experiences of a Pioneer Evangelist of the Northwest* (published by author, 1902), 28.

2. *Ibid.*, 343.

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