

Skadsheim, Petra (Tunheim) (1871–1923)

MILTON HOOK

Milton Hook, Ed.D. (Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, the United States). Hook retired in 1997 as a minister in the Greater Sydney Conference, Australia. An Australian by birth Hook has served the Church as a teacher at the elementary, academy and college levels, a missionary in Papua New Guinea, and as a local church pastor. In retirement he is a conjoint senior lecturer at Avondale College of Higher Education. He has authored *Flames Over Battle Creek, Avondale: Experiment on the Dora, Desmond Ford: Reformist Theologian, Gospel Revivalist the Seventh-day Adventist Heritage Series*, and many magazine articles. He is married to Noeleen and has two sons and three grandchildren.

Petra (Tunheim) Skadsheim was a pioneer missionary in Southeast Asia. Ultimately she gave her life in service in the mission field to which she committed her life.

Early Years

Petra Tunheim was born at Hatteland, Klepp, Rogaland, in southwest Norway, on February 18, 1871. She was the youngest of Tollef and Anna Tunheim's ten children.¹ As a child she helped to tend the sheep on their farm. Soon after her father's death in 1892 she and an older sister, together with four brothers and her aged mother, all migrated to America. Petra became a Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) when attending Union College, Lincoln, Nebraska, and then taught church school.² In 1898 she married Laurits Skadsheim, a fellow Adventist and Norwegian migrant. Laurits, better known as Louis, worked as a farm laborer at Brightwood in Richland County, North Dakota.³ After two years they relocated to Little Red Deer, Alberta, Canada.⁴ Their marriage did not last. They had no children and went their separate ways.

Petra took up canvassing and resumed an earlier desire to be an overseas missionary. She never dwelt on her heritage, her college training, or American and Canadian experiences. It was about 1902 when Petra seriously began to explore the possibilities of overseas mission service. She read in the 1903 *General Conference Bulletin* of a need for missionaries to go to Australia. She offered her services and sailed with a group of conference delegates returning to their Australian homeland⁵

In Australia

Arriving in Sydney about September 1903, she was paid a retainer to sell *Signs of the Times* and *Good Health* on the city streets and in business houses.⁶ She had carried in her luggage a thousand copies of *The Life Boat*, a religious digest published by the Chicago Sanitarium. At six pence each she sold out within a month and kept on ordering more from America. Later she trained others to do the same work, especially on Saturday nights, when the streets were filled with crowds in a casual mood.⁷ She had remarkable success, in her first year selling more than twelve thousand *Signs of the Times* and many annual subscriptions to *Good Health* and *The Life Boat*.⁸ Late in 1904 she was appointed to do similar work in Bathurst and assist with a tent crusade in the town.⁹ She labored in this manner until she was appointed to join a mission spearhead into Java.¹⁰

The Java Mission



Petra (Tunheim) Skadsheim
Photo courtesy of Adventist Heritage Centre, Australia.

In early November 1906 Skadsheim sailed to Surabaya, Java, via Brisbane.¹¹ Surabaya was an unhygienic and disease-ridden city. Skadsheim and another couple of missionaries hired quarters in a better part of the town, started to pick up Dutch, Javanese, Malay, and Chinese words, and sold church magazines and tracts from door to door. Soon after her arrival she chose to revert to her maiden name because it was the local custom for a woman in her circumstances to do that.¹²

It wasn't long before a Dutch Sabbathkeeper operating a mission on the relatively cool slopes of Mount Muria, east of Semarang, heard of their coming and invited Petra to visit her. Tunheim stayed with her for a few months, improving her own Dutch and giving Bible studies.¹³ The woman did not become a Seventh-day Adventist, but eventually gave control of the station to the SDA mission, and Petra administered the group and conducted services.¹⁴

Prior to assuming control of the mission station, Tunheim returned to the oppressive humidity of Surabaya at the same time as a potent strain of malaria took hold. Believing that drugs should not be used under any circumstances, the little community of Seventh-day Adventists had not taken the precaution of quinine treatment. They were hit hard by the epidemic, losing three of their number, including the child of a missionary family. Tunheim herself was at death's door, her skin turning purple.¹⁵ She made a recovery, but the disease continued to lurk in her body. This calamity forced a search for a cooler site similar to the property near Semarang. They found one in the mountains behind Surabaya and named it Soember Wekas, meaning "well of blessing."¹⁶

Tunheim continued her canvassing and Bible readings, all the time becoming more proficient in the four main languages.¹⁷ Back in Australia the youth in the Victorian Conference collected more than £100 in 1908 in order to pay her wages and purchase a saddle and typewriter for her use.¹⁸ She made a return visit to Australia as the representative of the Java Mission at the Australasian Union Conference session held at Warburton, VIC, October 1910, and spoke at youth meetings.¹⁹ Apart from some health clinic work done by three nurses, she was virtually alone in her evangelism when she returned to Surabaya.²⁰

At the beginning of 1912 the East Indies Field was transferred from Australia's responsibility to the Asiatic Division. Tunheim was relocated to Batavia, western Java. She followed her customary method of evangelism by distributing literature, once again with some success. Every Saturday she would hold a Sabbath School in the morning for the Dutch and another in the afternoon for the Malays, Javanese, and Chinese.²¹ She was elected the director and treasurer of the Batavia region in 1913.²² Malarial fevers continued to assail her most of the time.²³ Some other missionaries had returned to their homelands because of the debilitating disease. In 1915 she decided to spend her furlough in the cool mountain regions of America, sailing to San Francisco via the Philippine Islands, Hong Kong, Japan, and Hawaii.²⁴ She returned to her mission post refreshed in 1916 and made forays on foot into the mountains behind Batavia, distributing literature.²⁵ She gave another two years before the fevers returned with a vengeance. Poor in health, she was forced again to board ship for America via China in late 1919.

In Shanghai Tunheim broke her journey at Shanghai and sought medical help at the Adventist sanitarium. She quickly recovered and joined the staff of the hospital as preceptor of the nurses and teacher of a baptismal class. She also took Chinese language studies at the same time, passing the second-year university examinations in anticipation of returning to Java.²⁶ She discovered a group of students from Java at a nearby college and conducted a Sabbath School for them in their own language. In mid-1923 she wrote, "The Lord knows how I have yearned to return to Java."²⁷ Weeks later she boarded the S.S. *Khiva* bound for Java, only to perish with pneumonia on September 13 just as the ship was steaming into Singapore. She was laid to rest in the cemetery opposite the mission offices.²⁸

Legacy

Though small in stature, Petra Tunheim stands tall as a brave pioneer with Adventist literature. She had a gift for languages, being able to converse in Norwegian, Dutch, English, Chinese, Malay, and Javanese. In 1912 church headquarters credited her with raising up the first churches in Java, the Batavia²⁹ and Surabaya congregations.³⁰ As the elected head of mission in the Batavia district she was, perhaps, the first female to hold such a position in the foreign SDA mission field.

SOURCES

Allum, F[rancis] A. "Bathurst." *Union Conference Record* 9, no. 1 (January 1, 1905).

"California, Passenger and Crew Lists, 1882–1959." Ancestry.com. Retrieved from <http://search.ancestry.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=7949>.

"Canada [Federal] Census, 1901." FamilySearch.org. Accessed March 25, 2016. Retrieved from <https://familysearch.org/search/collection/1584557>.

Conger, Milton G. "A Modern Heroine." *The Youth's Instructor* 77, no. 51 (December 17, 1929).

Daniells, A[rthur] G. "Our Malaysian Mission Field." *ARH* 92, no. 27 (June 3, 1915).

"Delegation to Union Conference." *Union Conference Record* 14, no. 43/44 (October 24, 1910).

"Distribution of Labour." *Union Conference Record* 10, no. 20 (October 1, 1906).

Evans, I[rwin] H. "The Malaysian Mission Field." *ARH* 90, no. 30 (July 24, 1913).

Fulton, J[ohn] E. "First Impressions of Java." *ARH* 86, no. 30 (July 29, 1909).

"Genealogy Database-Geni.com-Genealogy." Geni's Genealogy Database. Accessed March 23, 2016. Retrieved from <https://www.geni.com/people/Petra-Skadsem/6000000037738116950>.

Graham, E[dith] M. "What Whole-hearted Service Can Do." *Union Conference Record* 13, no. 3 (January 18, 1909).

Jones, G[riffiths] F. "Java, Dutch East Indies." *ARH* 89, no. 52 (December 26, 1912).

———. "Java, East Indies." *ARH* 89, no. 42 (October 17, 1912).

"Mrs. Skadsheim, who has lately . . ." *Union Conference Record* 7, no. 20 (October 1, 1903).

"[Petra] Tunheim obituary." *Australasian Record* 27, no. 41 (October 15, 1923).

Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook. Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1906/1923.

"Sister Petra Tunheim, writing on . . ." *Australasian Record* 25, no. 4 (February 21, 1921).

"Sister Skadsheim, in writing to . . ." *Union Conference Record* 10, no. 24 (December 3, 1906).

Skadsheim, P[etra T.]. "Experiences in Sydney." *Union Conference Record* 8, no. 19 (October 1, 1904).

———. "More News from Java." *Union Conference Record* 11, no. 21 (May 27, 1907).

———. "The Life Boat in the Interior of Australia." *The Life Boat* 8, no. 1 (January, 1905).

Skadsheim, Petra [T.]. "My Experience in Periodical Work." *Union Conference Record* 7, no. 22 (November 1, 1903).

[Teasdale, George]. "Sad News from Java." *Union Conference Record* 11, no. 43 (October 28, 1907).

Teasdale, Geo[rge]. "Java." *Union Conference Record* 11, no. 17 (April 29, 1907).

Teasdale, George. "Our Mountain Home in Java." *Union Conference Record* 13, no. 12 (March 22, 1909).

Tunheim, P[etra]. "Back to Pangoengsen." *Union Conference Record* 13, no. 7 (February 15, 1909).

———. "Experiences in Java." *Union Conference Record* 12, no. 6 (February 10, 1908).

———. "Java, East Indies." *ARH* 89, no. 14 (April 4, 1912).

———. "Java Mission." *Union Conference Record* 12, no. 36/37 (September 7, 1908).

———. "Leaving Batavia, Java, on Furlough." *ARH* 92, no. 44 (September 9, 1915).

Tunheim, Petra. "Children as Well as Their Elders Need to Pray to the True God." *ARH* 100, no. 42 (October 18, 1923).

———. "Fruit from the Shanghai Sanitarium." *Australasian Record* 24, no. 14 (July 12, 1920).

———. "The Message Entering New Territory in Java." *ARH* 96, no. 35 (August 28, 1919).

———. "The Sadness of Parting." *Australasian Record* 16, no. 8 (February 19, 1912).

"United States [Federal] Census, 1900." FamilySearch.org. Accessed March 25, 2016. Retrieved from <https://familysearch.org/search/collection/1325221>.

Wood, [Anna]. "Fallen on the Way to the People She Loved." *ARH* 100, no. 45 (November 8, 1923).

Wood, George. "Java." *ARH* 88, no. 50 (December 14, 1911).

"Young People's Meeting." *Union Conference Record* 14, no. 45/46 (November 7, 1910).

NOTES

1. "Genealogy Database-Geni.com-Genealogy," Geni's Genealogy Database, accessed March 23, 2016, <https://www.geni.com/people/Petra-Skadsem/6000000037738116950>?
2. [Anna] Wood, "Fallen on the Way to the People She Loved," *ARH* 100, no. 45 (November 8, 1923): 22.?
3. "United States [Federal] Census, 1900," FamilySearch.org, accessed March 25, 2016, <https://familysearch.org/search/collection/1325221>?
4. "Canada [Federal] Census, 1901," FamilySearch.org, accessed March 25, 2016, <https://familysearch.org/search/collection/1584557>?
- 5.

- Petra [T.] Skadsheim, "My Experience in Periodical Work," *Union Conference Record* 7, no. 22 (November 1, 1903): 6, 7.?
6. "Mrs. Skadsheim, who has lately . . .," *Union Conference Record* 7, no. 20 (October 1, 1903): 7.?
 7. Skadsheim."My Experience in Periodical Work," 6-7.?
 8. P[etra T.] Skadsheim, "Experiences in Sydney," *Union Conference Record* 8, no. 19 (October 1, 1904): 6.?
 9. E.g., F[rancis] A. Allum, "Bathurst," *Union Conference Record* 9, no. 1 (January 1, 1905): 6.?
 10. "Distribution of Labour," *Union Conference Record* 10, no. 20 (October 1, 1906): 67.?
 11. "Sister Skadsheim, in writing to . . .," *Union Conference Record* 10, no. 24 (December 3, 1906): 7.?
 12. [Petra T.] Skadsheim, "More News from Java," *Union Conference Record* 11, no. 21 (May 27, 1907) 5, 6.?
 13. Geo[rge] Teasdale, "Java," *Union Conference Record* 11, no. 17 (April 29, 1907): 2.?
 14. George Teasdale, "Our Mountain Home in Java," *Union Conference Record* 13, no. 12 (March 22, 1909): 3.?
 15. [George Teasdale], "Sad News from Java," *Union Conference Record* 11, no. 43 (October 28, 1907): 3, 4.?
 16. P[etra] Tunheim, "Java Mission," *Union Conference Record* 12, no. 36/37 (September 7, 1908): 24, 25.?
 17. P[etra] Tunheim, "Experiences in Java," *Union Conference Record* 12, no. 6 (February 10, 1908): 4, 5.?
 18. E[dith] M. Graham, "What Whole-hearted Service Can Do," *Union Conference Record* 13, no. 3 (January 18, 1909): 8.?
 19. "Delegation to Union Conference," *Union Conference Record* 14, no. 43/44 (October 24, 1910): 56.?
 20. George Wood, "Java," *ARH* 88, no. 50 (December 14, 1911): 18.?
 21. P[etra] Tunheim, "Java, East Indies," *ARH* 89, no. 14 (April 4, 1912): 13, 14.?
 22. "West Java Mission," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1914), 130.?
 23. A[rthur] G. Daniells, "Our Malaysian Mission Field," *ARH* 92, no. 27 (June 3, 1915): 10–12.?
 24. P[etra] Tunheim, "Leaving Batavia, Java, on Furlough," *ARH* 92, no. 44 (September 9, 1915): 11.?
 25. Petra Tunheim, "The Message Entering New Territory in Java," *ARH* 96, no. 35 (August 28, 1919): 14, 15.?
 26. Milton G. Conger, "A Modern Heroine," *The Youth's Instructor* 77, no. 51 (December 17, 1929): 10.?
 27. Petra Tunheim, "Children as Well as Their Elders Need to Pray to the True God," *ARH* 100, no. 42 (October 18, 1923): 14.?
 28. "[Petra] Tunheim obituary," *Australasian Record* 27, no. 41 (October 15, 1923): 8.?
 29. G[riffiths] F. Jones, "Java, East Indies," *ARH* 89, no. 42 (October 17, 1912): 12.?
 30. G[riffiths] F. Jones, "Java, Dutch East Indies," *ARH* 89, no. 52 (December 26, 1912): 14.?