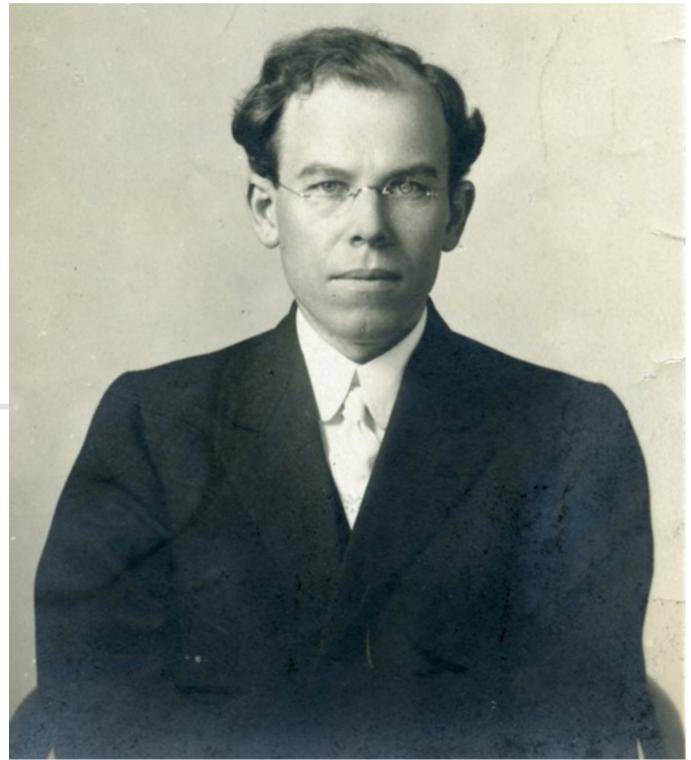


Crisler, Clarence Creager (1877–1936)



C.C. Crisler

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

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Stenographer, private secretary, editor, bibliophile, researcher, author, and trusted literary assistant to Ellen G. White, Clarence Crisler (*Piṛiyin Ku i sī lè*) was also a missionary, missiologist, and administrator.

Crisler was a gifted and trusted stenographer who served as a private secretary for three church presidents and became a literary assistant to Ellen White, working closely with her on revising and preparing her books, transcribing interviews, and other editorial work. As a missionary he served for two decades (1916-1936) as a point person in the rapid expansion of the church's work, particularly through print, across Asia.

Early Life

Clarence was born on May 25, 1877 in Brooklyn, Iowa, to Levi Hatten and Sarah Jane Creager Crisler (1852-1926; 1849-1903). His parents were married in 1875 and they had three children: Clarence (1877-1936), Florence (1879-1928), and Leroy Thaddius (1881-1943). When Clarence was five years old his parents first heard the Adventist message in Iowa, and subsequently, when they moved to Florida fully embraced Adventism. His father served as the first president of the Florida Conference (1893-1901).¹

Clarence finished high school in Orlando, Florida, in 1892.² He was baptized the following year, and went to Graysville Academy. He completed his education at Battle Creek College (1895-1897).³ After graduation he

served as stenographer to R. M. Kilgore, superintendent of "District No. 2" (later the Southern Union). Subsequently, he served as a "private secretary" to General Conference presidents O. A. Olsen, G. A. Irwin, and A. G. Daniells. Crisler, considered by some to be the denomination's first significant statistician, produced the detailed statistical reports at the 1901 General Conference session. It was here that he met Ellen G. White for the first time.⁴

On November 24, 1904, Clarence married Carolyn Hathaway (1873-1911), who had served for eight years as a proof reader in Battle Creek at the Review and Herald. The couple resided in California where Clarence was serving as secretary to Ellen G. White. They had one daughter, Beatrice Leena, born December 1, 1908. On Sabbath, June 17, 1911, while playing the organ at St. Helena Sanitarium church, Carolyn had a heart attack and tragically passed away three days later.⁵ After her death, Clarence's sister, Florence, a physician working in the Los Angeles area took in Beatrice for an undetermined period of time. On December 26, 1913, Clarence married Minnie Hawkins (1874-1963), who also worked on Ellen G. White's staff, and presumably resumed care of his daughter, Beatrice.⁶

Literary Assistant for Ellen G. White

From 1901 to 1915 Crisler served as secretary to Ellen G. White. He worked closely on the 1911 revision of *The Great Controversy* verifying over 400 citations in preparation for the new edition. He later was instrumental in preparing the final eighteen chapters of *Life Sketches* (1915) and *Prophets and Kings* (1917). A dedicated bibliophile, he amassed a sizeable library. He sold 500 volumes to Ellen G. White that served as a significant expansion of reference material for her staff.⁷

In her will, Ellen White named Crisler as one of five members of the board of trustees of her estate, and following her death he served as the first secretary of this board (1915-1917). His later mission service prevented him from playing a more active role in the White Estate although he remained a trusted confidante and valued proponent of her writings. In 1926 he designated fellow missionary, J. E. Fulton, to act on his behalf with regard to matters pertaining to the White Estate.⁸

Missionary to China

After Ellen G. White's death in 1915, Crisler stayed by to help complete some final projects and began to work once again as a stenographer for important church meetings. As stenographer at the 1915 Annual Council, he listened to a rousing missionary report by R. C. Porter and R. F. Cottrell.⁹ Afterwards, General Conference president A. G. Daniells pressed Crisler to travel with him to Asia on a missionary tour, and the following year the *Review* reported that Crisler had "accepted a call to the Asiatic Division" where he was expected to work closely "in the preparation of book literature for the Far East."¹⁰ Within a few weeks they sailed on a "tour" through the Far East. He left on the ship *China* on November 2, 1916, with a large group of missionaries. His

wife, Minnie, and daughter, Beatrice, would join them some months later.¹¹

Crisler was a studious researcher investing resources into purchasing maps, books, dictionaries and anything else that would help him to learn the Chinese language and culture. Although his initial “call” seemed rather nebulous, after he arrived, he quickly went to work. With Daniells and other leaders he attended the Asiatic Division Conference meeting—a pivotal meeting that would shape the future direction of the church’s missionary activities in Asia. The loosely affiliated network of missions was organized into conferences and unions. Crisler was elected secretary of the Asiatic Division and appointed chair of the “Literature Bureau,” tasked with developing new evangelistic materials through print.¹² It was also at this meeting that he and Minnie were appointed as editors of the *Far Eastern Division Outlook* (later renamed the *China Division Reporter*).

Crisler also became secretary of the newly created Far Eastern Division (1916-1929). He was taking an increasingly visible role in church missionary work, and I. H. Evans, president of the division, ordained him to the ministry in 1922. From 1930 until his death in 1936, Crisler served as secretary of the newly reformulated China Division.

Crisler’s arrival coincided with a major push by the denomination to expand across Asia, and in particular, within China, as missionary efforts during World War I in other parts of the world were thwarted. Crisler would function as a vital link providing regular reports and statistics from Asia and soliciting urgent funds from church members in North America. His gripping accounts of missionary work, sometimes even his own firsthand accounts where he believed his life had been providentially spared, coupled with calls for mission service, provided inspiration for others to join the missionary work in China.¹³ It is clear that Crisler fell deeply in love with the Chinese people: “The people of China are among the most lovable of all people on earth; they are precious in Heaven’s sight; and there are many among them who are ready to hear and to obey the Master’s call.”¹⁴ Crisler was known for his creative ingenuity in sharing his faith. For example, he was remembered for translating Bible promises on the inside of wrappers of candy that he distributed to children. A century later, some Adventists in China traced their conversion to these acts of kindness that broke down prejudice.¹⁵

The detailed records and statistical reports by Crisler reveal some missional priorities during this formative time period. By 1928 he reported that there were 159 ordained ministers of which 76 were locals. He repeatedly urged training of Chinese workers. In 1931 he reported an ordination service of eight “Chinese brethren” that helped equalize the ratio of foreign to native ministers. He was happy to report soon afterward that they had reached the point where there was now more local than foreign workers. Crisler regarded this as a significant milestone for the development of Adventism in China as he embraced a vision of the Chinese people providing the leadership necessary to reach their own people.¹⁶

Crisler believed that print was the primary means through which the Chinese people would be reached. He worked tirelessly to build and expand printing facilities across China. Early tracts and books were translated and

printed in languages wherever mission stations were established. Crisler would prove to be one of the most durable and influential church leaders across Asia during his slightly more than two decades of mission service.

Death and Legacy

Crisler believed that missionary bases must be constantly expanded into new territories as each new mission post served as a new center to train and send out missionaries. By 1932 he fulfilled his lifelong dream of expanding the Adventist message into Tibet and Mongolia. Crisler discovered a Mongolian-German grammar, which he viewed as an opportunity to train pioneer workers. By 1935 Crisler and Harold Shultz met a Tibetan abbot who gave them shelter. On one of his trips, reported in the *Review* in January 1935, Crisler was chased by bandits who fired guns at their mule train.¹⁷

It came as a shock when the China Division office received word that Crisler had died from pneumonia while on a trip to a remote mission station in the village of Titao, Kansus, about sixty miles south of Lanchow, on March 28, 1936.¹⁸ As soon as they heard of his illness, church leaders tried to secure an airplane from General Chiang-kai Shek to rescue him, but unfortunately due to repairs, they were not able to go until after he passed away. Crisler's wife, Minnie, and daughter, Beatrice, with a small group of friends accompanied division leaders to bury him at the mission compound in Lanchow.¹⁹

Before leaving for this trip, Crisler had been unwell and his friends advised him to rest and to go on the trip later, but his penchant to overwork proved to be his fatal flaw. Church leaders afterward praised this "indefatigable worker" as a "noble man of God."²⁰ The *China Division Outlook* devoted an entire issue to his memory. At the 1936 General Conference session church leaders mourned the loss of his presence. At that meeting W. J. Harris said Crisler had "laid down his life, worn with the burdens of the task, weary with days and days of travel, a sacrifice to the call of those neglected fields."²¹ Pioneer missionary to Mongolia John Oss observed the "tragic death" of Crisler" as an inspiration to "greater devotion" and sacrifice for the advancement of the Adventist message and mission.²²

After the Chinese Revolution of 1949, believers in China risked their lives during the 1950s and 1960s to dig up Crisler's grave and to hide his bones. In 2009 his remains were reinterred on the side of a remote mountain hilltop as a memorial to this sacrificial pioneer showing how deeply the Chinese people loved and respected him.²³

After Crisler's death his wife Minnie returned to Australia for annual leave. His daughter Beatrice, by then a music teacher at Far Eastern Academy, returned to the United States. Minnie eventually returned to China where she stayed until forced to leave during World War II. Tragically, most of Crisler's personal papers and diaries were lost when Minnie returned to the United States and was unable to pay the import tax. Beatrice (1908-2002) served during the war in the China-Burma-India theater.²⁴ She later married Albert Skarupa (1916-2003), who was also a World War II veteran, and they settled in southern California.²⁵

A manuscript Crisler wrote in 1925 titled *Organization: Its Character, Purpose, Place, and Development in the Seventh-day Adventist Church* was published posthumously in 1938 with a foreword by then church president J. L. McElhany. Minnie compiled some of Crisler's mission reports into another manuscript, *China's Borderlands and Beyond*, also published posthumously.

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