

# Booth, Mary Inez Lang (1913–2010)

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## DAN SHULTZ

Dan Shultz, emeritus professor of music, Walla Walla University, has researched and written extensively about Seventh-day Adventist music history and musicians. His publications include *A Great Tradition*—a history of music at Walla Walla University, and the *Adventist Musicians Biographical Resource*—an encyclopedia with biographies of over 1100 Adventist musicians. He founded the International Adventist Musicians Association, serving as its president for ten years and editing its publications and website for over thirty years. Shultz and his wife, Carolyn (nee Stevens), live in College Place, Washington.

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Inez Booth was the first full-time music teacher at Oakwood College (now a university) and her 44 years of teaching there is a record in service at one school unequaled by any other music teacher at an Adventist college or university.<sup>1</sup>

## Early Life and Education

Inez Lang was born in Mobile, Alabama, on July 26, 1913, the only daughter of Nelson Edward and Eloise Alexander Lang. A year after she was born, her mother died and she and an older brother, Nelson, Jr., were cared for by their maternal grandmother, Mary Shines, and great grandmother, Alice Shines<sup>2</sup>

After their father married Pearl Osborne in 1920, the family moved to Santa Barbara, California, where four more children, Charles, Frances, Claire (Chisholm), and Alfred, were born. Inez attended public schools and graduated from the local high school. She had started piano lessons in her teenage years and made rapid progress, accompanying the choir at the St. Paul A.M.E. Church while in high school<sup>3</sup>

Although they were Methodists, one of the family's friends, Alice Jones, the only black member in the Santa Barbara Seventh-day Adventist Church, encouraged her parents to send Inez to Pacific Union College (PUC). She enrolled in 1933 and majored in music, studying piano under Gilmore McDonald, intent on becoming a music teacher. During her third year at PUC, she joined the Adventist church. After completing a B.A. in music in 1937, she spent two years in San Francisco, staying in the home of the Bethel A.M.E. minister Runyon White and his



Inez Booth

Photo courtesy of Oakwood University.

wife. Inez served as organist in their church, taught piano privately, and conducted a community choir.<sup>4</sup>

## Oakwood Career

During her second year of living with the Whites, Inez Lang applied for a teaching position at several schools, including Oakwood Junior College (OJC). She received responses from several and invitations to interview. Following her interview for OJC, the president of the college, J. L. Moran, offered her a position. Her friends encouraged her to seriously consider going, observing that “everything grows” and the school would likely do the same.

Although she spent her first year at the college teaching in the elementary school and serving as dean of women, Inez began to teach music classes and direct the choir at OJC at the end of that year, replacing Otis B. Edwards, who had been teaching both music and history.<sup>5</sup>

In her earliest years in the department, she taught and played both piano and organ, the latter being her primary instrument. She completed an M.Mus. degree in organ performance and an M.Mus. Ed. at Columbia University in 1954. She became known for excellence as a church organist, serving in that capacity at the Oakwood College church for forty years, and as an accompanist for numerous choral productions.

## Marriage and Daughters

Inez met Albert Sidney Booth in the 1940s, while playing for an evangelistic meeting in Mississippi, and married him as World War II ended, in 1945. He then served as official photographer for the college and owned the only black photography studio in nearby Huntsville.

They would have two daughters, Iris (Sutton) and Letitia Ann (Boles). When friend and fellow music teacher Alyne Dumas Lee died in 1970, Inez became legal guardian of her two daughters, Angela (Meriweather) and Susan (Baker).

Booth had become chair of the music department in 1950, a position she held until 1967. Four years later, she returned to that position and led the program until her retirement 12 years later, at age 70.<sup>6</sup>

## Jail Band Ministry

Booth had a passion for ministering to those who were in prison and each week visited jails in the Huntsville area. The inmates were in awe of her, calling her “Gramma Booth,” and were deeply affected by her care for them and her message of God’s forgiveness.

The visits to the jails included singing by Oakwood students who assisted in the program, a sermonette, encouraging words by Booth, prayer, and distribution of Bibles, literature, and some snack foods. The ministry

also included working with families of the incarcerated and intervening when appropriate on behalf of the inmates.

For more than 54 years she led out in this work, now known as the Oakwood University Jail Band Ministry. Booth wrote about in the book *Forty Years Behind Bars*, published in 1994.<sup>7</sup> She also served the community as a member of the Madison County Sheriff's Committee.

## Final Years

The Booths lived near the college following her retirement in 1983 at age seventy. Albert Sidney preceded her in death on May 9, 1987, at age 79.

Inez continued her jail ministry, using a walker and wheelchair when these became necessary, and did not stop until 2006 when she simply became too infirm to continue. She passed away on August 3, 2010, at age 97<sup>8</sup>

## Legacy

Inez Lang Booth's record 44 years of service at Oakwood included 29 years as chair of the music department, the longest tenure of any music chair in the school's history. She was known for her graciousness and ability to nurture young teachers, foster collegiality within the program, and run a united and productive department.

The numerous and varied honors conferred on her testify to the manifold ways Inez Booth enriched the lives of those she served with beauty, grace, and compassion. One of these recognitions came in 1992 from her high school in Santa Barbara for being the first recipient of the George Washington Carver Club Scholarship when she had graduated in the 1930s. Other examples include the Message Excellence Award in 1989 (Oakwood College Alumni Association), the Huntsville City Council Award in 1991, and designation as the Oakwood College J.L. Moran Alumni Honoree in 2001. She also received the Lifetime Achievement Award from the United Christian Artists Association and an honorary doctorate from Oakwood University in 2010.<sup>9</sup> She was honored by Madison County as a Deputy Sheriff in 1983 and again in 2003, during her ninetieth year. At a party celebrating her 90<sup>th</sup> birthday, Huntsville Mayor Loretta Spencer declared July 26, 2013 as "Inez Booth Day."<sup>10</sup>

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## NOTES

1. This article in its entirety draws substantially on two interviews the author conducted with Inez Booth, the first on October 1, 2006, and the second, which included verification of information gained from the first, on October 16, 2006.
2. Roy E. Malcolm, "Inez L. Booth: Forty Years Behind Bars," *Southern Tidings*, February 2003, 8 (an interview with Booth).
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.; Ciro Sepulveda and Lea Hardy, editors, *The Ladies of Oakwood* (Huntsville: Oakwood College Press, 2003), 75-77.
5. Ibid., 77; "Otis B. Edwards obituary," *Southern Tidings*, December 9, 1971, 27; Oakwood College *Acorn* yearbooks from 1940s and 1950s,
6. Years of service as recorded in the *Acorn*, the Oakwood College annual yearbook; "Oakwood College News Notes," *The North American Regional Voice*, August 1984, 15; "Choral Society, Symphony perform at Oakwood," *Southern Tidings*, July 1984, 17; "Mary Inez Booth (1913-2010)," accessed June 23, 2020, <http://www.blacksdahistory.org>; Lucile C. Lacy and Eurydice V. Osterman, "Music at Oakwood," *Adventist Heritage*, 17, No. 1 (1996), 38-43.
7. Malcolm, 8-9; Paul Gattis, "Inez Booth made a lifetime out of reaching those in Jail," *Huntsville Times*, August 14, 2010; Benjamin Baker, "Jesus in Jail: The Ministry of Inez Booth," accessed June 23, 2020, [http://www.blacksdahistory.org/The\\_Theology\\_of\\_Mary\\_Inez\\_Booth.html](http://www.blacksdahistory.org/The_Theology_of_Mary_Inez_Booth.html)
8. U.S. Social Security Death Indices for Albert and Inez Booth, Ancestry.com.
9. Malcolm, 9; "Mary Inez Booth," *Alumni Homecoming Journal* (booklet), Oakwood College, March 1989, 31; "Mary Inez Booth (1913-2010)," <http://www.blacksdahistory.org>.
10. Benjamin Baker, "Mary Inez Booth," *Encyclopedia of Alabama*, accessed June 23, 2020, <http://www.encyclopediaofalabama.org/article/h-4125>.

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