



Eric and Grace Boehm with Highland men, Papua New Guinea, 1952

Photo courtesy of Ray Boehm.

Boehm, Eric Alan Albert (1910–1984)
and Dorothy Isabel (Shelton) (c.
1911–1940); later Grace Jean (Reynolds)
(1913–1983)

Originally trained as a secondary history teacher, a career long Adventist educator, Lester Devine, Ed.D., has taught at elementary, secondary and higher education levels and spent more than three decades in elected educational leadership positions in two divisions of the world Church, NAD (1969-1982) and SPD (1982-2005). He completed his forty years of denominational service with a term as director of the Ellen G. White/Adventist Research Centre at Avondale University College in Australia where his life-long hobby of learning and presenting on Adventist heritage issues became his vocation.

Eric Boehm was a Seventh-day Adventist pastor, missionary and Church administrator. He was the first president of the Bismarck Solomons Union Mission based in Rabaul, Mandated territory of New Guinea.

Early Life

Eric Alan Albert Boehm was born on Sunday, July 3, 1910, at Hamilton, Victoria.¹ His father was Albert Edward Boehm, and his mother, Bertha Emma Louise (Tepper) Boehm.² Eric began school in 1916 at Anakie with his sister, Leila, traveling there each day by horse and sulky, which their mother drove.³

Ministry

At the age of 14, on November 17, 1924, Eric began work as an apprentice press machinist for the Signs Publishing Company in Warburton, Victoria, Australia.⁴ He finished his apprenticeship on December 31, 1930.⁵ During that year, he began a friendship with Dorothy Isabel Shelton.⁶ At the beginning of 1931, he began work at the Signs Publishing Company as a fully qualified press machinist but remained in that role for only eight months.⁷ He had decided to attend the Australasian Missionary College (AMC) to prepare for pastoral and evangelistic ministry. In preparation for his study and in order to save for his studies, he commenced literature evangelism in September 1931 and worked as a colporteur until the end of October that year.⁸ At the end of the year, he went to AMC to begin his studies. Canvassing during his vacations, he completed his ministerial training studies at the end of 1935.⁹

Boehm's first appointment was as an evangelist trainee in Wallsend, Newcastle, New South Wales.¹⁰ But after just one year, he was appointed to the Aroma mission on the Papuan coast.¹¹ The appointment was conditional on his being married. So, on December 1, 1936, just before leaving for Papua, he and Dorothy Isabel Shelton of Kurraca in Western Victoria, were married in the North Fitzroy Church, Melbourne.¹² Dorothy's mother had become a Seventh-day Adventist around the time of Dorothy's birth after studying the Bible with George G. Stewart and Frank G. Rampton while they were colporteurs in Victoria.¹³

Eric and Dorothy Boehm left Sydney aboard the *SS Montoro* on January 13, 1937. They arrived in Port Moresby on January 21, where they were greeted by Pastor W. N. Lock and his family and Charles E. Mitchell and family. They spent a few days at the mission headquarters at Mirigeda and then boarded the small mission ship *Diari*, arriving at Aroma on January 28.¹⁴

Working at Aroma, Boehm quickly learned the Motu language and some of the local village dialects. In preparation for the arrival of their firstborn son, Eric and Dorothy traveled to the Mirigeda Training School, near Port Moresby, a trip that took up to a week by canoe or two days by mission ship.¹⁵ Kenneth Alvin was born in Port Moresby.¹⁶ While at Mirigeda, Eric, with the help of Lester, son of veteran missionary W. N. Lock, translated and printed the Papuan Advent Hymnal on the very same press he had used in his printing apprenticeship at Warburton some years earlier.¹⁷

Toward the end of 1939, the family returned to Australia on furlough.¹⁸ Their second son, Raymond Leighton, was born at the Warburton Hydro near Melbourne.¹⁹ Unfortunately, Dorothy became quite ill after the delivery, and the local physicians, not being familiar with tropical diseases, did not diagnose her cerebral malaria in time. Ten days after giving birth, Dorothy died, at 29 years of age, just before the antimalarial medicine she needed arrived at the hospital from Melbourne.²⁰ This left Eric with two young sons, one of them a newborn. Dorothy was buried at Wesburn, near Warburton. Eric's sister, Leila Hill, and her husband, Richmond, took the two young brothers into their home in Wahroonga on the outskirts of Sydney and looked after them.²¹

With his sons well cared for, Eric returned to Papua New Guinea in early 1941 and worked in the Gulf and, with war approaching, dug air raid trenches. When Port Moresby was bombed, an evacuation order was given, and he accepted an offer of passage on the *Potrero* to Cairns.²² Once back in Australia, he took a train from Cairns all the way south to Sydney. When he walked into the headquarters office at Wahroonga, there was all-around relief because the office had lost all contact with him as a result of the lack of communication caused by the confusion of the war.²³

In April 1942, Boehm began a period of service in pastoral evangelism in New South Wales.²⁴ On September 23, 1942, he married Grace Jean Reynolds,²⁵ a registered nurse at Sydney Sanitarium and Hospital.²⁶ A few weeks later, he was ordained to the gospel ministry at Wahroonga on October 3, 1942.²⁷

In the year 1943, Eric was engaged in pastoral work in Broken Hill and Bathurst.²⁸ His third son, Grace's first, Donalyn Albert, was born at Sydney Adventist Hospital.²⁹ The year 1944 was spent pastoring in Bathurst and Orange.³⁰ Before the war in the Pacific had officially ended, Eric Boehm was back in Papua, this time at Bisiatabu at the southern end of the famous Kokoda Track.³¹ Here he served as the district director and secretary-treasurer of the Papua Mission until the end of 1947.³² During 1948, Eric and his family took furlough back in Australia, and on his return, he was the district director for the Madana area. In March 1949, Eric was appointed the secretary-treasurer of the North East New Guinea Mission and based in Madang after spending the first two months that year as the secretary-treasurer of the Coral Sea Union Mission.³³

Shortly after taking up his new secretary-treasurer role, Eric was visiting Togaba Hospital and staying with the Barnard family, when the house burned down late at night.³⁴ Made of local bush materials, the house burned very quickly, and he lost everything, including his briefcase that contained the union mission hand-written ledger. Consequently, there was much added work with the local missions to reconstruct the lost files. In

addition, he lost his Bible and all his sermon notes, and this was a long-term loss. Eric also lost all his clothes except the little he was wearing late at night when the house caught fire. Also during 1949, Grace and the children returned to Australia. A fourth son, Robert Bruce, was born in the Sydney Sanitarium.³⁵ Eric was still based in Madang when his son Don started school and the first camp meeting for Papua New Guinea was held that year at Bena Bena.

However, the family stayed only 18 months in Madang because Eric soon took responsibility for the 45-foot mission vessel *Light*, and the family moved to Manus Island for three months.³⁶ With the disruption of the war, there had not been any regular church program. Some months were spent providing communion, on all days of the week, and conducting baptisms and marriages. When visiting Wuvulu in the Western Islands, Eric was ordered off the island by the locals when making his second visit, but Grace, being a nurse, noted a number of tuberculosis (TB) cases, and Eric reported this to the District Commissioner. A patrol brought a number of these ill people back to the mainland for treatment. Adventists visiting people in the hospital shared their food with these TB patients and did their best to make them comfortable, and in time they came to believe that it was the good Adventist food and hospitality that made them well. On hearing of this, their chief demanded an Adventist missionary be located on their island.³⁷

In 1951, Eric was appointed as the president of the Northeast New Guinea Mission in the PNG highlands and based in Goroka. With no housing yet available there, the family once again went home to Australia. Eric followed some months later on furlough, and he attended several camp meetings with national workers Pastor Manovaki, a missionary, and Pastor Masive, a village chief. When the family returned to a newly constructed home at Goroka, Ken remained at Gosford in Australia for his secondary education. In those years, all mission families had to send their children to Australia for high school.

In 1953 Eric was appointed the president of the newly formed Bismark-Solomons Union Mission with headquarters in Rabaul, New Guinea. In 1954, Ray left home to attend high school in Australia, and Eric attended, with Pastor Kata Ragoso, the General Conference Session held that year in San Francisco, California, United States of America.³⁸ The months Eric was away, his family spent in Australia.³⁹

In 1956 the three older boys were baptized by their father in the Rabaul harbor.⁴⁰ Ken, the oldest, began his career in construction, most of it in PNG as a mission builder supervisor, and later as a building construction teacher.⁴¹ Don went to high school in Australia. Eric continued in his presidency until after the 1962 General Conference Session, once again in San Francisco.⁴² Then the Boehm family returned permanently to Australia,⁴³ and in January 1963, Eric took up new duties as the district pastor for the five New South Wales Central Coast Adventist churches.⁴⁴ That was a challenging role that, in time, led to new church buildings being built at Gosford, Erina, and Ourimbah, and a church school established in the area that, in spite of many initial challenges, has grown into a K-12 grade program with nearly one thousand students enrolled at the Central Coast Adventist School.⁴⁵ When Eric retired on April 30, 1971,⁴⁶ the heart condition he had struggled with earlier

had been repaired by successful surgery, and he was fit and well during the initial years of his retirement.⁴⁷

Later Life

In October 1983 Grace turned 70 and had recovered by then from several surgical procedures, and the family celebrated her birthday with her, but she died the next month, on November 24, 1983.⁴⁸ Eric's last words to Grace had been, "Good night Grace. I'll see you in the morning."⁴⁹ The next year Eric had a heart attack and spent some weeks in the hospital. With continuing angina problems, he was no longer able to pursue any energetic activities. Eric died on November 12, 1984,⁵⁰ a little less than a year after Grace, his wife and companion of many years. Now buried alongside each other at the Point Clare Cemetery on the New South Wales Central Coast, these two career missionaries, both totally committed to the cause of Christ, await their certain reward.⁵¹

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