

Chapman, George Thomas

(1896–1982)

LESTER DEVINE

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.

George T. Chapman served as the Health Food Secretary of the Australasian Union Conference and the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Sanitarium Health Food Company in Australia through the great depression and, later, served 26 years as the General Manager of Loma Linda Foods in California, United States of America.

George Thomas Chapman was born on April 28, 1896.¹ His parents, George and Sarah, became Seventh-day Adventists in Western Australia in 1898 through the work of the pioneer literature evangelists J. M. Johanson and F. W. Reekie.² George Chapman Sr. became a prominent layman in Western Australia, serving as a member of the board for the Darling Range School (now Carmel College) and as the senior elder of the Preston church.³

George Thomas Chapman thus grew up as a Seventh-day Adventist. He spent five years at the Darling Range School near Perth, Western Australia, graduating in 1913 with a preparatory diploma and an intermediate diploma in 1915.⁴ He then attended the Australasian Missionary College at Cooranbong, New South Wales, and graduated from the business course at the end of 1916.⁵ He began his denominational employment in February 1917, working for a few months at the Sanitarium Health Food Company Sydney Depot. He then spent almost seven years working for Avondale Industries before transferring to the Australasian Union Conference office,



George Chapman

Photo courtesy of the Sanitarium Health Food Company Archives.

where he worked as an auditor from 1924 until September 1926.⁶

George married Lilian May Davies (known as Lilla), who was born in Gawler, South Australia, on June 21, 1888, and who also had attended the Darling Range School.⁷ Initially, two daughters, Hazel Gwen (Racker, b. 1918) and Laurel May (Hoyt, b. 1920) were born into their family.⁸ Another daughter, Phyllis (Booth), was born later.⁹

Chapman was appointed the Health Food Secretary at the 12th session of the Australasian Union Conference held in September 1926.¹⁰ In this role, he was the CEO of the Sanitarium Health Food Company. Chapman led the company until 1936 through the difficult years of the great depression prior to World War II, growing the business at a time when many other commercial enterprises were shutting their doors.

Toward the end of 1928, the Sanitarium Health Food Company under Chapman's leadership acquired Grain Products Limited.¹¹ With the acquisition came the trademark for a product by the name of Weet-Bix. Little was it known that Weet-Bix was to become the leading breakfast cereal in Australia and New Zealand for much of the remainder of the 20th century. Then at the end of 1931, Chapman was instrumental in the takeover of the Cerix Puffed Wheat Company. As of January 1, 1932, Cerix came under the control of the Sanitarium Health Food Company.¹²

Chapman intentionally provided a strong sense of Providence in his leadership. At the Union Conference Council in 1933 he said,

In the last eighteen months of depression we have had a modern miracle of God's care in the Health Food work in this field. While businesses have been crashing all around us, and many others have been sustaining serious losses, or at best making greatly reduced profits, and while they have been putting off their staffs [sic], and experiencing great difficulty in carrying on, the Health Food work has surpassed all previous records. Twenty eight per cent more Health Foods were sold during 1932 than during the previous year. Is not this wonderful? . . . The first six months of this year we have been able to increase our business by 26 per cent, compared with the first half of last year. We thank God for this.¹³

Toward the end of his tenure in the leadership of the Sanitarium Health Food Company, Chapman reported,

The work is now being carried on in eight factories and special packing departments, eleven retail shops, seven vegetarian cafes, and eleven wholesale distributing depots throughout Australia and New Zealand. We also do business in the Orient, and are about to open a regular branch of the business there.

The total number of workers in all departments is about 700, including more than 100 students who work part-time in our factories at Cooranbong, N.S.W., and Carmel, W.A., and who are thus assisted to gain a Christian education, and to fit themselves for service in the cause generally. . . .

The output of our factories has reached the grand total of 5482 tons per annum.¹⁴

After serving as general manager of the Sanitarium Health Food Company from 1926 to 1936, Chapman responded to an invitation to become general manager of Loma Linda Foods in the United States. It was with reluctance that he was released from his responsibilities in Australia. Pastor A. H. Piper, Secretary of the Australasian Division, elaborated by stating that he feared "that some of our brethren little realise the weight of responsibility which Brother Chapman has carried in managing a business employing 1,000 hands. For the Lord to have blessed the department as He has blessed it indicates God's high approval of their work."¹⁵ A vote of appreciation was recorded at the Division session:

That this Conference assembled place on record our very high appreciation of the efficient and faithful services which Brother G. T. Chapman has rendered to this field as General Secretary of the Health Food Department, and we pray that his future work in America may be greatly blessed of God, and that Brother and Sister Chapman and their three daughters may find life on the eastern side of the Pacific as congenial and happy as they have found it on this side of the ocean.¹⁶

During his time as general manager of Loma Linda Foods, Chapman "built a new plant in Arlington and . . . nurtured the business from a fledgling enterprise to a multi-million-dollar manufacturing and distributing organization of top-quality foods sold from coast to coast and in foreign countries."¹⁷ He also managed the establishment of a new manufacturing plant in Mount Vernon, Ohio, in January 1951 and another new plant in Oshawa, Ontario, Canada, which was just beginning production at the time of his retirement.¹⁸ Chapman remained the general manager of Loma Linda Foods until his retirement was announced on December 17, 1962.¹⁹ The board of directors of Loma Linda Foods expressed appreciation for his 26 years of service to the company and his lifetime of service to the denomination.²⁰

George Chapman died in Loma Linda, California, on March 7, 1982.²¹ Lilian Chapman died in Arcadia, California, on June 1, 1990.²²

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NOTES

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