

Nelson, William Edward (1883–1953)



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.

William Nelson was trained as a science teacher and became president of three major American colleges. Later, he spent two decades at General Conference headquarters, first as education secretary and finally as treasurer.

W. E. Nelson

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

Heritage and Training

William Edward Nelson was born in Hurley, south-eastern South Dakota, on July 20, 1883. His parents, Nels and Andrea (Kier) Nelson, were of Danish heritage.¹ His siblings were a much older brother, Andrew (b.1868)² and Theodore (b.1885).³ At the age of twelve he was baptized by his father at Swan Lake, South Dakota. His early education was in the public system. He advanced to Union College, Nebraska, graduating with a Bachelor of Science in 1904, and then proceeded to the University of Nebraska for twelve months of further study.⁴

Church Career

In 1905 William accepted an appointment to teach at Walla Walla College, Washington State. His subjects were mathematics, physics, chemistry, and electrical engineering.⁵ He married Susan "Susie" Martha Shively in her

home at Osceola, Iowa, on June 18, 1907. She was a nurse who had graduated from Boulder Sanitarium⁶. They remained at Walla Walla College until 1916, William adding the role of business manager, 1910 through 1912⁷.

William transferred to Keene, Texas, in 1916 in order to be principal and business manager of Southwestern Junior College.⁸ For five years, 1916 through 1921, he gave strong leadership to the institution before moving to the presidency of Pacific Union College at Saint Helena, California. Once again he proved to be a very capable college administrator. The institution became the first in the area to win regional accreditation. The campus blossomed with additional dormitories and new facilities in the departments of science, music, pedagogy, agriculture, and printing. His tenure experienced the Great Depression, but William demonstrated a penchant for accumulating financial reserves for lean times. It was said of him that his success rested in "his ability to select a capable faculty, to persuade students to reach high standards, and to win the support of church and conference leaders."⁹

William had been ordained in San Francisco by Elder John Fulton in 1928. In 1934 he transitioned to General Conference headquarters, accepting a new role as education secretary. He had three associates to assist him in governance of the extensive educational system within the church. Rarely did he publish articles about education, one exception being titled, "How to Maintain the Integrity of Our Schools."¹⁰

In 1936 William was assigned to the heavy responsibility as treasurer at the General Conference level. Once again he had a handful of assistants to help carry the load.¹¹ His busy schedule included overseas trips to monitor the needs of the world field and assess the results of the special allocations of funds for mission projects. Those who knew him best said he "shunned debt as he would leprosy." They added, "His ideal was to spend to strengthen and build, and to do it generously, always with reserves for emergencies."¹² In his last report as treasurer, 1950, he reflected on the difficult Second World War years when significant amounts of church property were destroyed and the costly process of re-building took place. He reported that membership generosity toward mission funds had saved a collapse of medical, educational, and humanitarian work. Tithe totals had not fallen away but instead had maintained a gradual increase. He was optimistic for the future.¹³

William's impeccable qualities of sound judgment and financial acumen were carried into his final role at headquarters when he was elected in 1950 as one of eight general field secretaries of the General Conference.¹⁴

Sunset

At nearly seventy years of age William could have justifiably retired, but he kept soldiering on, only to suffer a cerebral haemorrhage on Friday evening, May 8, 1953. Little more than twenty-four hours later he passed away at midnight after Sabbath.¹⁵ His body was taken to the West Coast and interred in Saint Helena Cemetery near Pacific Union College.¹⁶ Susie passed away on June 12, 1968, and was laid to rest alongside William.¹⁷

SOURCES

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Nelson, W[illiam] E. "The Treasurer's Report." *ARH*, July 13, 1950.

"Report of the Nominating Committee." *ARH*, July 16, 1950.

"Susan Martha 'Susie' (Shively) Nelson." Find A Grave Memorial, 2021. Accessed July 30, 2021.

<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/48214953/susan-martha-nelson>

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1. William Edward Nelson. General Conference Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research, Silver Spring, Maryland. Work Service Records. Versatile Box 7301. Folder: William Edward Nelson. Document: "Biographical Information Form."
2. "Andrew Nelson," *ARH*, September 28, 1950, 20.
3. "William E. Nelson." FamilySearch, Intellectual Reserve, 2021. Accessed August 1, 2021, <https://www.familysearch.org/tree/pedigree/landscape/MLG2-WRB>.
4. William Edward Nelson. General Conference Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research, Silver Spring, Maryland. Work Service Records. Versatile Box 7301. Folder: William Edward Nelson. Document: "Biographical Information Form."
5. E.g., "Walla Walla College," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1906), 96.

6. "Life Sketch of William E. Nelson," *ARH*, June 4, 1953, 19.
7. E.g., "Walla Walla College," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1911), 158-159.
8. E.g., "Southwestern Junior College," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1917), 193.
9. "Life Sketch of William E. Nelson," *ARH*, June 4, 1953, 19.
10. W[illiam] E. Nelson, "How to Maintain the Integrity of Our Schools," *Home and School*, January 1937, 3-4, 30.
11. "General Conference," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1937), 9.
12. "Life Sketch of William E. Nelson," *ARH*, June 4, 1953, 19.
13. W[illiam] E. Nelson, "The Treasurer's Report," *ARH*, July 13, 1950, 28-29.
14. "Report of the Nominating Committee," *ARH*, July 16, 1950, 81-82.
15. "Death of a President," *Pacific Union Recorder*, May 18, 1953, 1.
16. "William Edward Nelson," Find A Grave Memorial, 2021, accessed July 30, 2021, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/48214956/william-edward-nelson>.
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