

Cobbin, Rex Ewen (1927–2021) and Winnie Ethel Isabel (Heaton) (1925–2011)



Rex and Win Cobbin

Photo courtesy of Barry Oliver.

BARRY OLIVER

Barry Oliver, Ph.D., retired in 2015 as president of the South Pacific Division of Seventh-day Adventists, Sydney, Australia. An Australian by birth Oliver has served the Church as a pastor, evangelist, college teacher, and administrator. In retirement, he is a conjoint associate professor at Avondale College of Higher Education. He has authored over 106 significant publications and 192 magazine articles. He is married to Julie with three adult sons and three grandchildren.

Australians Pastor Rex and Winnie Cobbin served the Seventh-day Adventist Church for just over thirty-

eight years. Twenty of those years were spent as missionaries in the Island Nations of the South Pacific including Pitcairn Island, New Hebrides (now Vanuatu), Fiji, and Papua New Guinea. During that time Rex was a pastor, evangelist, mission and conference president, union departmental director, and union president. Winnie, a highly qualified nurse, worked closely by his side wherever they were sent, supporting the work of the church and caring for their four children.

Early Life

Rex Ewen Cobbin was born on February 15, 1927, at Pomona, Queensland, Australia.¹ His parents were William Matthew Cobbin (1896–1981) and Edith Ann (Lucas) (1901–1990).² Rex had two sisters—Priscilla and Marie—and two brothers—Bob and Max. Rex left school at fifteen and worked for a short time with his grandfather who was a builder. He then decided to attend the Australasian Missionary College at Avondale to study for the ministry.³ Shortly before leaving to attend Avondale, Rex was baptized in the Maryborough Church.⁴

Winnie Ethel Isabel Heaton was born on August 13, 1925, at Cardiff, New South Wales, Australia.⁵ Her parents were Arthur George Heaton (1891–1971) and Sarah Ethel (Noble) (1893–1982).⁶ Arthur Heaton had been born at Casino in North New South Wales but while still young moved to Avondale with his parents after they had become Seventh-day Adventists. The family was living in the district at the time where Ellen White established her home called “Sunnyside” at Cooranbong. Arthur was the last of a family of five.⁷

Before her marriage to Arthur Heaton, Ethel Noble lived with her parents, two sisters, and six brothers at Awaba, some fifteen kilometers to the north of Cooranbong and the Australasian Missionary College (Avondale).⁸ Arthur and Ethel were married in Collector, New South Wales, with Ethel becoming a Seventh-day Adventist some years subsequent to their marriage. Nine children were born into the family of Arthur and Ethel Heaton. There were four daughters, Essie (Mrs. Noel Thomson); Joy (Mrs. David Caldwell); Daphne (Mrs. Christie Thomson); and Winnie (Mrs. Rex Cobbin). There were five sons. The first died at eight months of age and another was stillborn. The others were Bernard, Oswald, and Leslie.⁹ In 1937 the family moved to Cooranbong so that the children could have the advantage of an Adventist Christian education and be able to attend the Australasian Missionary College at Avondale and the Sydney Sanitarium.¹⁰

Education and Marriage

Rex attended the Australasian Missionary College at Avondale from 1943 until 1948 when he graduated from the ministerial course.¹¹ In his early years at Avondale he met Winnie Heaton. They were working together in the Sanitarium Health Food Factory packing Weet Bix. Both were to earn income for their education at Avondale.¹²

Winnie Heaton trained as a nurse at the Sydney Sanitarium from 1944, graduating at the end of 1947.¹³ She not only gained her nursing qualifications but also gained additional qualifications as a midwife—something that was to prove invaluable in their service in the Pacific, especially Pitcairn Island.¹⁴

Rex Cobbin and Win Heaton were married at the Avondale Church by Pastor N. C. Burns on February 8, 1949.¹⁵ Four children were born into the marriage: Dexter Paul in Adelaide, South Australia; Darleen Joy in Cooranbong, New South Wales; Kerralyn Suzanne in Adelaide, South Australia; and Kendell Vance in Port Lincoln, South Australia.¹⁶

Years of Service

Rex and Win Cobbin commenced their service for the church on February 15, 1949.¹⁷ Rex was assigned to assist Evangelist Austin P. Cooke with his evangelistic series in the Port Adelaide City Hall, South Australia.¹⁸ In 1950 he continued to work with Pastor Cooke, who was now conducting an evangelistic series of meetings in Mt. Gambier, South Australia.¹⁹ In 1951 he worked with Pastor Arch Hefren, who was conducting a series of meetings in Renmark, South Australia. It was hard work. The conference president, James W. Kent, remarked

that “some idea of the difficulties under which we now labour in country centres may be gathered from the fact that all three families associated with this mission are housed in caravans.”²⁰ In fact, the caravan that the Cobbins occupied had been constructed by Rex himself. The family was to live in that caravan for much of their tenure in South Australia. Accommodation was both difficult to access and expensive.²¹

In 1955 Rex was still engaged in evangelism, associating with Pastor Ray Stanley, who was conducting an evangelistic series in Murray Bridge, South Australia. His designated roles were song leader and Bible Instructor.²² In 1956 Rex and Win transferred to Port Lincoln where they cared for the church for that year.²³ During a visit to Adelaide that year, Rex was ordained as a Seventh-day Adventist minister.²⁴

At the beginning of 1957 the family, now with all four children, moved to Western Australia.²⁵ In the West the Cobbins continued to be primarily engaged in evangelism while caring for the Fremantle Church.²⁶ Initially, Rex was reported to be assisting Pastor Ron Vince in Perth with a series of Voice of Youth programs.²⁷ He was then spoken of as about to commence a series of meetings in suburban Perth in November, and then seven months later as having just completed another series of evangelistic meetings.²⁸ He was reported to have baptized seven persons in Fremantle at the end of 1958.²⁹

After just two years in Perth the focus of their ministry changed dramatically. They were granted a two-year leave of absence from the Western Australian Conference and appointed to take up the work of the Seventh-day Adventist Church on Pitcairn Island.³⁰ They left Sydney on February 24 and arrived on Pitcairn on March 9, 1959.³¹ They soon settled into life on Pitcairn and enjoyed their service on the island.³² They reported that “the days just fly past and seem far too short to do all we plan.”³³

While on Pitcairn, both Rex and Win wrote articles in the *Australasian Record* recounting many of their experiences and the daily lives of the Pitcairn Islanders. They described the perils of taking the longboats out to passing ships to retrieve supplies and sell their artifacts to passengers and crew. Then there were the perilous landings at Bounty Bay as the longboats returned.³⁴ There were annual visits to Oeno Island some eighty miles distant to fish and collect coconuts, shells, and coral for their artifacts. They also described a visit by the union president, Pastor McCutcheon, at the end of 1960. Such a visit was indeed a rare event.³⁵

At the beginning of 1961, their term of service on Pitcairn Island expired. Instead of returning to Western Australia, they decided to continue their missionary service and were appointed to the East Fiji Mission where Rex was to assume the presidency of the mission replacing Pastor Barry Crabtree.³⁶ They returned to Sydney for furlough on March 4, 1961, after two years on Pitcairn Island.³⁷

During April 1961 the family departed Sydney for Fiji.³⁸ In the East Fiji Mission, based at Vatuvonu, Rex worked together with Filemone Bera who, as secretary-treasurer of the mission, was the first Pacific Islander to hold such a position in the Central Pacific Union Mission. It was an excellent opportunity for him to mentor Bera, who was later to become the first Fijian to be president of the Fiji Mission.³⁹ Rex continued his practice of running series of evangelistic meetings.⁴⁰ His emphasis on soul winning was obvious in the operation and strategic

planning for the mission.⁴¹ The mission also operated the small mission vessel, *Ai Talai*, enabling visitation around the scattered islands and isolated areas.⁴²

A transfer to the New Hebrides came at the end of 1962. Rex was appointed as president of the New Hebrides Mission at the Australasian Division annual meetings.⁴³ The condominium of the New Hebrides was later named Vanuatu at the time of Independence in 1980. The family traveled the eight hundred miles from Suva Fiji to Santo New Hebrides aboard the sixty-five foot long mission vessel *Fetu Ao* with Pastor Alec Thompson as ship's captain.⁴⁴ They were only to remain in the New Hebrides for some sixteen months. During that time Rex was involved in a lay school of evangelism and in caring for the growth of the Parker Missionary School at Aore and the hospital under the care of Dr Joeli Taoi.⁴⁵ However, the need for schooling for the two older children brought the family back to Australia at the end of April 1964.⁴⁶

On returning to Australia, the family was invited to join the pastoral staff in the South New South Wales Conference.⁴⁷ For the rest of 1964 and in 1965, Rex was the pastor of the Goulburn Church. During that time he conducted evangelistic activities including a baptism at the end of 1964 in which the author of this article was baptized.⁴⁸ Then in 1966 and 1967 the family relocated to Wagga Wagga in the Riverina district of New South Wales. At both Goulburn and Wagga Win worked at the regional base hospitals as a midwife.⁴⁹

At the end of 1967, an appointment came that was to see the family back in the Pacific Islands. They had been back in Australia for only four years. Rex was appointed as a district director and evangelist in the Fiji Mission. However, it was not until May 2, 1968, that Rex and Win, together with their two younger children, flew from Sydney to Nadi airport in Fiji to recommence their service in the Pacific. The Fiji government had placed limits on the number of expatriates able to serve at any one time in the various religious organizations and the Cobbins, along with a number of other families, had their entry permits delayed by over four months.⁵⁰

After just over a year back in Fiji, Rex was appointed as the president of the Fiji Mission. Just as was the case eight years earlier when he became president of the then East Fiji Mission, he followed Barry Crabtree into the role and was associated with Pastor Filemone Bera.⁵¹ On this occasion Bera was the assistant president rather than the secretary-treasurer.⁵²

At the end of 1970, Rex was invited to be a departmental director for the Central Pacific Union Mission.⁵³ He was given the responsibility of the Sabbath School, Temperance, Medical, and Public Relations Departments.⁵⁴ In this role he traveled extensively throughout the scattered island nations of the South Pacific and promoted the work of the church.⁵⁵

Then after their furlough in mid-1972, Rex was appointed as the president of the New Britain New Ireland Mission in the Mandated Territory of New Guinea.⁵⁶ Three missions--East New Britain, West New Britain, and New Ireland--had been amalgamated to form the new mission.⁵⁷ With headquarters in Rabaul on the island of New Britain, the mission was one of ten local missions in the newly reorganized Papua New Guinea Union Mission.⁵⁸

The Cobbins were living in Rabaul until the end of 1974. Rex wrote a report on the successful amalgamation that formed the New Britain New Ireland Mission in the *Australasian Record* at the beginning of 1973.⁵⁹ He also reported on the opening of a village hospital in the Wide Bay area of East New Britain during his tenure.⁶⁰

Subsequent to the amalgamation, the islands of Mussau, Emirau, and Tench were within the territory of the New Britain New Ireland Mission. The history of the islands and the arrival of the Seventh-day Adventist missionaries holds a unique place as a remarkable success for the mission of the church.⁶¹ On December 6, 1973, the General Conference president, Robert Pierson, together with the union President Freeman McCutcheon and the local mission president, Rex Cobbin, visited the islands. This is the only time a General Conference president has visited these isolated islands.⁶²

The next assignment for Pastor Rex Cobbin was the portfolio of Lay Activities and Sabbath School director of the North New South Wales Conference based in Newcastle, New South Wales.⁶³ Then at the beginning of 1978, Rex was elected as the president of the South Australia Conference, based in Adelaide.⁶⁴ The conference included the Northern Territory.⁶⁵ The Cobbins had commenced their ministry in South Australia almost thirty years previous to their latest appointment.

Under his leadership a number of building projects were completed in the South Australian Conference. A new church complex was opened and dedicated at Millicent in 1978.⁶⁶ A new church complex was opened and dedicated at Mt. Gambier in 1979.⁶⁷ Also in 1979, a new block was completed on the South Australian Conference campground comprising a ministers' prayer room, a general office, a camp superintendent's office, a store, a Sanitarium Health Food shop, a medical center, and an Adventist Book Center.⁶⁸ Then in 1980, major extensions to the Adelaide High School were opened.⁶⁹

Rex not only carried the responsibilities of the conference president but also the roles of Ministerial Association secretary, Religious Liberty secretary, and Education secretary.⁷⁰ Despite this heavy load, the conference flourished under his leadership. The year 1978 saw the all-time record for baptisms in the conference—244—besting the previous best of 184 in 1965.⁷¹

Their tenure in South Australia was cut short when, at the division session in 1980, Rex and Win were asked to return to the Pacific mission field. Rex was appointed as president of the Central Pacific Union Mission, based in Fiji. He was to replace his good friend and colleague Don Mitchell, who was transferring to Papua New Guinea.⁷²

After five years serving in the role of union president, Rex was able to report to the division session in 1985 that in the last five years in the CPUM there had been 7575 baptisms; an increase in church membership from 16,352 to 19,787; 51 new church buildings, and 48 other major building projects completed.⁷³

One of the most significant accomplishments of Rex Cobbin and his team was the successful re-establishment of the Central Pacific Union Mission headquarters in Fiji. In December 1972, an action was taken to transfer the headquarters of the Central Pacific Union Mission to Auckland, New Zealand, from Suva, Fiji.⁷⁴

The Central Pacific Union Mission did not include the conferences in New Zealand. But for a number of reasons, it was deemed more efficient to administer the local missions of the Central Pacific Union from Auckland rather than from Suva.⁷⁵ The transfer of the union headquarters to Auckland was complete by January 1974.

The union headquarters returned to Fiji in 1987 when approval had been granted by the government of Fiji and a new office was opened at Tamavua, Suva, Fiji, on February 9 of that year.⁷⁶ This was the last official engagement for Pastor Cobbin as union president before he retired.⁷⁷

Summary of service⁷⁸

12.2.49–31.12.50 Intern and Evangelist South Australian Conference

1.1.52–31.12.56 Pastor–Evangelist South Australian Conference

1.1.57–31.1.59 Pastor–Evangelist Western Australian Conference

11.2.59–31.12.60 Pastor Pitcairn Island

1.1.61–31.12.62 President East Fiji Mission

1.1.63–28.4.64 President New Hebrides Mission

28.4.64–25.12.67 Pastor South New South Wales Conference

1.1.68–31.8.69 District Director Fiji Mission

1.9.69–31.12.70 President Fiji Mission

1.1.71–30.4.72 Departmental Director Central Pacific Union Mission

1.5.72–31.12.74 President New Britain New Ireland Mission

1.1.75–31.12.77 Departmental Director North New South Wales Conference

1.1.78–31.7.80 President South Australian Conference

1.8.80–15.2.87 President Central Pacific Union Mission

Retirement and Later Years

Pastor and Mrs. Cobbin retired from active service on February 15, 1987.⁷⁹ It was Rex's sixtieth birthday. They set up home at Palmwoods in Queensland but soon made the move to Cooranbong so they could be closer to their family. Rex built their home in Beauty Point Road. Again, they did not stay long in this home as they were invited to become the caretakers of *Sunnyside*, the Australian home of Ellen G. White during the years 1895–1900.⁸⁰

Their final move was into Alton Villas where Rex pursued his artistic talents and grew a vegetable garden.⁸¹

Win died on January 26, 2011, and is buried in the Avondale Adventist Cemetery at Cooranbong⁸² She and Rex had been married for sixty-two years.⁸³ In 2012 Rex married Enid Hawkes. He died on February 20, 2021, and he is buried in the Avondale Adventist Cemetery.

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