



Elmer Coulston and Leatha Wenke Coulston.

Photo courtesy of Center for Adventist Research.

Coulston, Elmer Floyd, (1906–1934) and Leatha (Wenke) (later, Brooks) (1905–1996)

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.

Elmer and Leatha Coulston were medical missionaries in northern China in the early 1930s. Their united pioneering efforts were cut short when Elmer died of diphtheria in 1934.

Heritage and Training

Elmer Coulston was born in Los Angeles, California, on October 24, 1906, to L. C. Coulston and his wife Mabel (Gage). His only sibling was Irene Elizabeth, who was born in 1907. Elmer had a notable Seventh-day Adventist heritage. His father L. C. Coulston (1879-1976) was "a 70-year employee of the Battle Creek Sanitarium and the oldest living member of the original staff."¹ Elmer's great uncle was C. H. Jones, general manager of the Pacific Press Publishing Association. An uncle and aunt, Drs. Paul and Linnie (Gage) Roth, were pioneer medical missionaries to France. His maternal grandfather, Elder W. C. Gage, was one of the earliest pastors of the headquarters congregation at the Battle Creek Dime Tabernacle.²

Soon after Elmer's birth, his family returned to their kin in Battle Creek, Michigan, and it was there that Elmer was raised and educated at denominational schools. He excelled in his studies and was valedictorian of the senior class of 1923 at Battle Creek Academy.³ He advanced to Emmanuel Missionary College, Berrien Springs, Michigan, where he completed his Bachelor of Science in 1927⁴ and then proceeded to the College of Medical Evangelists in California, and received his Doctor of Medicine in absentia in June 1930.⁵ His absence from his graduation ceremony is explained by the fact that he had completed his course work and was already serving as an intern back in Michigan at St. Mary's Hospital, Detroit.⁶

After completing all his academic requirements, Elmer married Nurse Leatha Wenke on August 17, 1930⁷ Leatha's father was a Michigan celery farmer of Dutch heritage.⁸ She had completed her pre-nursing training at Emmanuel Missionary College at the same time that Elmer attended the institution.⁹

Overseas Mission Service

The newlyweds sailed from San Francisco on August 30, 1930, after receiving an appointment to medical missionary work in China.¹⁰ On arrival in Shanghai, they proceeded to the College of Chinese Studies, Beijing, for 12 months of intensive language study. The principal of the institution later declared Elmer had proved to be one of the most outstanding students that he had encountered. Elmer gained the ability to use simple Chinese explanations when talking to his patients and cleverly instructed his trainee nurses in more technical medical terms.¹¹ During his language studies, he was called on to give injections for typhoid fever and to perform some

minor surgeries with primitive sterilizing equipment.¹²

While studying in Beijing, a new boutique facility that became known as the North China Sanitarium and Hospital was built at Kalgan, Chahar Province (now Zhangjiakou, Hebei Province). Its purpose was to cater for the northern Chinese border community in addition to the nomadic Mongolians across the border. The institution was equipped with hydrotherapy, clinical, and surgical facilities.¹³ Elmer himself emptied his American bank account to provide additional equipment. From the outset he recognized the difficult circumstances he faced, having only one graduate nurse to assist him and a staff of locals “who knew nothing about hygiene.”¹⁴ Despite the hardships, he developed a competent team of surgical assistants, anesthetists, ward supervisors, and laboratory technicians.¹⁵

In the first 12 months after the November 1931 opening of the institution, Elmer reported 220 surgical operations, 385 inpatients, and a healthy financial income. A clinic was opened in downtown Kalgan that ministered to approximately 40 patients every day. A second clinic was later established specifically for Mongolians, and that facility cared for up to 15 individuals each day.¹⁶ Specialist medical supplies that were impossible to buy in China were donated and mailed to Elmer by relatives in America.¹⁷

Leatha adopted the role of training the nursing staff and doing some nursing herself, not because of any monetary gain, but simply as part of her missionary endeavors. In fact, their personal financial rewards were slim. The Great Depression severely affected mission budgets. In 1933, all missionaries experienced a further six percent drop in wages, resulting in almost half of what their income was in 1931.¹⁸ Allocations from head office ceased, and the hospital had to be run on a self-supporting basis.¹⁹ Finances, however, paled into insignificance when compared to the life-threatening realities they endured in Kalgan. They conducted the hospital and clinics while in the midst of a war between Japanese and Chinese troops. Several times their lives were threatened. There were times when the hospital and they themselves were robbed by bandits. On one occasion, a section of the hospital was destroyed accidentally when two of the staff were handling a volatile liquid, that explosion killing one member. There were periods when Elmer suffered from pleurisy and fevers.²⁰ The most tragic episode was the loss of their ten-month-old son, Chris.²¹

At one time there arose the necessity for Dr. Harry Miller to be called to Kalgan to perform surgery on Elmer. Early in his recuperation, while still confined to bed, another patient desperately needed surgery. Elmer instructed his nursing staff that the man be prepared and wheeled alongside his bed. He then leaned over and successfully performed the operation, saving the man’s life.²²

Elmer continued to have health problems. In August 1933, it became imperative for him to seek treatment at Beijing University Medical Centre.²³ In April 1934, he had to make another trip away from Kalgan. He left Leatha in charge of the institution, but while he was away, war conditions worsened, making it difficult for him to find transport for the return trip. He was forced to walk long distances in between hitching rides on occasional trains carrying army supplies. It took three days for him to reach home, and he arrived gaunt, his energies spent, and

he was hardly able to stand because of weariness.²⁴

The pressures of work had become overwhelming. Chinese soldiers were getting frostbite, and Elmer was called on to perform amputations of toes and feet. Hundreds of Japanese prisoners of war were also brought to him for vaccinations against various diseases. Regular patients filled the institution to capacity, necessitating some to be bedded on thin mattresses on the floor. Women were kept busy sewing extra quilts for warmth. The nursing staff was inadequate for the volume of work. Elmer and Leatha often worked by lamplight until late into the night. No assistance for them was forthcoming because all but one of the mission doctors were on furlough, a logistical blunder with serious consequences.²⁵

Calamity came in the form of a diphtheria attack on Elmer. A mission official rushed to him with medication but found him so weakened that immediate arrangements were made for his transport to Beijing where desperate measures were taken to save his life, including a tracheotomy. Despite all efforts, Elmer passed away on Saturday evening, May 26, 1934.²⁶ The outpouring of grief was like a tsunami that swept around the world, and the sad news was featured in the major denominational periodicals to notify his numerous medical peers scattered in remote mission outposts. Hundreds of people, including dignitaries from the Chinese provincial government and military staff, attended the funeral service. Elmer was laid to rest in Kalgan alongside the grave of his infant son.²⁷ Grateful Chinese officials erected a white marble monument in front of the sanitarium in recognition of the sacrificial pioneer work done by Elmer and Leatha.²⁸

After Kalgan

In her grief Leatha was overcome with a sense of abandonment during Elmer's excessive workload. She blamed mission authorities for expecting her and Elmer to cope with the Herculean task of running an isolated hospital with inadequate medical staff. Elmer, she believed, had worked himself to death.²⁹ Following his death, she stayed for a few months with fellow missionaries at the China Training Institute north of Shanghai, undecided about returning home to America or remaining to nurse in China.³⁰ Despite her dislike of Shanghai, she finally agreed to join the staff of the Shanghai Sanitarium as an instructor in the School of Nursing.³¹ She was granted a furlough in 1936³² and then returned to her teaching in Shanghai³³ until 1938.³⁴

Leatha continued as a nurse educator in America. She married widower Edwin Arthur Brooks, a science teacher who later trained as a physician and anesthesiologist. Together they served in Taiwan Sanitarium and Hospital and Saigon Adventist Hospital.³⁵ Leatha completed 35 years as a nurse educator for the Seventh-day Adventist Church. She passed away in Colton, California, on May 12, 1996, at the age of ninety. She was interred in Montecito Memorial Park alongside Edwin who had predeceased her in 1988.³⁶

Appel, George J. "Chris L. C. Coulston." *China Division Reporter*, September/October 1932.

"Battle Creek Academy Items." *Lake Union Herald*, April 4, 1923.

"College News Notes." *Lake Union Herald*, November 22, 1932.

Coulston, Elmer F. "The North China Sanitarium and Hospital." *China Division Reporter*, July 1934.

"Coulston, L.C." Obituaries. *The Lake Union Herald*, May 11, 1976.

"Died at His Post." *Australasian Record*, October 15, 1934.

"Dr. Elmer Coulston's Diploma." Elmer F. Coulston Collection, Loma Linda University Archives and Special Collections. Accessed October 10, 2022, [here](#).

"Edwin Arthur Brooks." *ARH*, September 8, 1988.

"Elmer Coulston to Family - April 19, 1931." Correspondence. Elmer F. Coulston Collection. Loma Linda University Archives and Special Collections. Accessed October 10, 2022, [here](#).

"Elmer Coulston to L. C. Coulston - Oct. 16, 1931." Correspondence. Elmer F. Coulston Collection, Loma Linda University Archives and Special Collections. Accessed October 10, 2022, [here](#).

"Elmer Floyd Coulston." FamilySearch, Intellectual Reserve, 2021. Accessed August 6, 2021.

<https://www.familysearch.org/tree/pedigree/landscape/L849-XJ5>

"Emmanuel Missionary College." *Lake Union Herald*, April 7, 1936.

"Harry W. Miller to L.C. and M. Coulston - May 27, 1934." Correspondence. Elmer F. Coulston Collection. Loma Linda University Archives and Special Collections. Accessed October 10, 2022, [here](#).

Hartwell, R.H. "Shanghai Sanitarium." *China Division Reporter*, November 1, 1936.

"Leatha Coulston to Parents - May 1933." Correspondence. Elmer F. Coulston Collection. Loma Linda University Archives and Special Collections. Accessed October 10, 2022, [here](#).

"Leatha Coulston to Elmer's Parents - May 19, 1933." Correspondence. Elmer F. Coulston Collection. Loma Linda University Archives and Special Collections. Accessed October 10, 2022, [here](#).

"Leatha Coulston to Parents - May 20, 1933." Correspondence. Elmer F. Coulston Collection. Loma Linda University Archives and Special Collections. Accessed October 10, 2022, [here](#).

"Leatha Coulston to Parents - Aug. 3, 1933." Correspondence. Elmer F. Coulston Collection. Loma Linda University Archives and Special Collections. Accessed October 10, 2022, [here](#).

"Leatha Coulston to Parents - April 16, 1934." Correspondence. Elmer F. Coulston Collection. Loma Linda University Archives and Special Collections. Accessed October 10, 2022, [here](#).

"Leatha Coulston to Parents - June 1934." Correspondence. Elmer F. Coulston Collection. Loma Linda University Archives and Special Collections. Accessed October 10, 2022, [here](#).

"Leatha Coulston to Parents - Jul. 5, 1934." Correspondence. Elmer F. Coulston Collection. Loma Linda University Archives and Special Collections. Accessed October 10, 2022, [here](#).

"Leatha W. (Wenke) Brooks." Find A Grave Memorial, 2021. Accessed August 6, 2021.
<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/57917386/leatha-w.-brooks>

Miller, Harry W. "Memoirs to the Late Doctor Coulston." *China Division Reporter*, July 1934.

Miller, Harry W. "Elmer Floyd Coulston." *ARH*, August 16, 1934.

"Monument Erected by Grateful Chinese." *Battle Creek Enquirer*, November 29, 1936.

"Mrs. L. Coulston of the China..." *Far Eastern Division Outlook*, October 1938.

Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook. Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association. Various years.
<https://www.adventistyearbook.org/>.

The Cardinal. Berrien Springs, Michigan: Emmanuel Missionary College, 1927.

NOTES

1. "Coulston, L. C.," obituary, *The Lake Union Herald*, May 11, 1976, 14.
2. Harry W. Miller, "Elmer Floyd Coulston," *ARH*, August 16, 1934, 21.
3. "Battle Creek Academy Items," *Lake Union Herald*, April 4, 1923, 9.
4. *The Cardinal* (Berrien Springs, Michigan: Emmanuel Missionary College, 1927), 19.
5. "Dr. Elmer Coulston's Diploma," Elmer F. Coulston Collection, Loma Linda University Archives and Special Collections, accessed October 10, 2022, [here](#).
6. Harry W. Miller, "Elmer Floyd Coulston," *ARH*, August 16, 1934, 21.
7. Ibid.
8. "Elmer Floyd Coulston." FamilySearch, Intellectual Reserve, 2021, accessed August 6, 2021,
<https://www.familysearch.org/tree/pedigree/landscape/L849-XJ5>.
9. "College News Notes," *Lake Union Herald*, November 22, 1932, 5.

10. Harry W. Miller, "Elmer Floyd Coulston," *ARH*, August 16, 1934, 21.
11. Harry W. Miller, "Memoirs to the Late Doctor Coulston," *China Division Reporter*, July 1934, 22-23.
12. "Elmer Coulston to Family - April 19, 1931," Correspondence, Elmer F. Coulston Collection, Loma Linda University Archives and Special Collections, accessed October 10, 2022, [here](#).
13. Harry W. Miller, "Memoirs to the Late Doctor Coulston," *China Division Reporter*, July 1934, 22-23.
14. "Elmer Coulston to L. C. Coulston - Oct. 16, 1931," Correspondence, Elmer F. Coulston Collection, Loma Linda University Archives and Special Collections, accessed October 10, 2022, [here](#).
15. Harry W. Miller, "Memoirs to the Late Doctor Coulston," *China Division Reporter*, July 1934, 22-23.
16. Elmer F. Coulston, "The North China Sanitarium and Hospital," *China Division Reporter*, July 1934, 15.
17. "Leatha Coulston to Parents - May 1933," Correspondence, Elmer F. Coulston Collection, Loma Linda University Archives and Special Collections, accessed October 10, 2022, [here](#).
18. "Leatha Coulston to Elmer's Parents - May 19, 1933," Correspondence, Elmer F. Coulston Collection, Loma Linda University Archives and Special Collections, accessed October 10, 2022, [here](#).
19. "Leatha Coulston to Parents - May 20, 1933," Correspondence, Elmer F. Coulston Collection, Loma Linda University Archives and Special Collections, accessed October 10, 2022, [here](#).
20. Harry W. Miller, "Memoirs to the Late Doctor Coulston," *China Division Reporter*, July 1934, 22-23.
21. George J. Appel, "Chris L. C. Coulston," *China Division Reporter*, September/October 1932, 8.
22. Harry W. Miller, "Memoirs to the Late Doctor Coulston," *China Division Reporter*, July 1934, 22-23.
23. "Leatha Coulston to Parents - Aug. 3, 1933," Correspondence, Elmer F. Coulston Collection, Loma Linda University Archives and Special Collections, accessed October 10, 2022, [here](#).
24. "Leatha Coulston to Parents - April 16, 1934," Correspondence, Elmer F. Coulston Collection, Loma Linda University Archives and Special Collections, accessed October 10, 2022, [here](#).
25. *Ibid.*

26. "Harry W. Miller to L.C. and M. Coulston - May 27, 1934," Correspondence, Elmer F. Coulston Collection, Loma Linda University Archives and Special Collections, accessed October 10, 2022, [here](#).
 27. "Died at His Post," *Australasian Record*, October 15, 1934, 2-3.
 28. "Monument Erected by Grateful Chinese," *Battle Creek Enquirer*, November 29, 1936, 1.
 29. "Leatha Coulston to Parents - June 1934," Correspondence, Elmer F. Coulston Collection, Loma Linda University Archives and Special Collections, accessed October 10, 2022, [here](#).
 30. "Leatha Coulston to Parents - Jul. 5, 1934," Correspondence, Elmer F. Coulston Collection, Loma Linda University Archives and Special Collections, accessed October 10, 2022, [here](#).
 31. "Shanghai Sanitarium-Hospital and Clinic," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1936), 321.
 32. "Emmanuel Missionary College," *Lake Union Herald*, April 7, 1936, 4.
 33. R. H. Hartwell, "Shanghai Sanitarium," *China Division Reporter*, November 1, 1936, 8.
 34. "Mrs. L. Coulston of the China..." *Far Eastern Division Outlook*, October 1938, 8.
 35. "Edward Arthur Brooks," *ARH*, September 8, 1988, 22; "Saigon Adventist Hospital," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1960), 295.
 36. "Leatha W. (Wenke) Brooks," Find A Grave Memorial, 2021, accessed August 6, 2021, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/57917386/leatha-w.-brooks>.
-

encyclopedia.adventist.org is an official website of the [Seventh-day Adventist World Church](#)

© 2020 General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 12501 Old Columbia Pike Silver Spring , MD 20904 USA 301-680-6000