

Thompson, Ida Elizabeth

(1870–1939)

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American missionary to China from 1902 to 1931, Ida Thompson opened the first Adventist school in China – Bethel Girls School in Canton (Guangzhou). That school became what is now Hong Kong Adventist College.



Ida E. Thompson, age 49, in 1919.

Photo courtesy of Kris Erskine.

Early Life and Education

Born on May 12, 1870 to a farm family in Mauston, Wisconsin, Ida Elizabeth Thompson grew up in the rural country. Her address in the 1870 census records the town of Lindina as the family residence. Lindina is just a few miles southwest of Mauston and more than a century and a half after Thompson's birth, is still sparsely populated with scattered farmhouses and barns. The Thompson family lived on the edge of the frontier which only a generation before had been pioneered and settled; according to notes found in a family Bible after Mr. Ozro Thompson passed away, when the Thompson family moved to Wisconsin in the 1850s they were one of only three families within a forty mile radius. Ozro Thompson and his wife Martha Elizabeth began observing the Sabbath in 1860, before the Adventist church was officially organized.¹

When Ida was born there was no nearby Adventist school and although little is known of her elementary years, she did attend the local Mauston High School.² It was during these high school years that Ida was baptized and it was "home influence" that she attributed to her conversion. That "home influence" must have been strong; three

of the Thompson daughters became missionaries in China.³

After high school Ida may have completed a two-year course at Battle Creek College, a Seventh-day Adventist college in Battle Creek, Michigan. Ida would have been only fourteen at the time – not an unusual age for a student to begin college in the 1880s – and her subsequent job as a teacher, beginning in 1886, may suggest that she had some teacher training.⁴ In her 1919 General Conference of Seventh-day Adventist personnel file, Ida reported that she had completed four years of college, two of which were at Union college. She does not specify when she attended Battle Creek College but there are no other possible gaps in her biography after 1894.

Career and Missions

In 1886, at the age of just sixteen, Ida began her career as an educator, teaching at a public school in Wisconsin. The name of the school is not known, nor is the grade level or subject she taught, but in 1894 Ida shifted from teaching and began “Bible work” in Madison, still in Wisconsin.⁵ In this role she worked as secretary for the Wisconsin State Sabbath School Department perhaps from 1894 until 1901, when she began mission work overseas.⁶ During those several years it is unclear whether Thompson completed further schooling but the combination of seventeen years of both teaching and Bible work had prepared her to be a missionary. Ida seems to have had her mind set on South America and was commissioned to serve in Brazil.⁷

In April 1901 the General Conference session was held in Battle Creek, Michigan. It was here, on April 21, that Thompson’s sister Emma, and Emma’s husband Jacob, were commissioned as missionaries to China. They would be among the first General Conference sponsored missionaries to that country.⁸ According to Florence Nagel – another China missionary and contemporary of Thompson while both were in China – when Ida Thompson learned that her sister was going to China she requested of the General Conference that she be permitted to serve in Asia with her sister instead of sailing for South America. Nagel writes, “she begged the Mission Board to let her go with them.” But the General Conference replied that there was not sufficient budget to send her to China, so Ida’s home conference in Wisconsin offered to sponsor her instead.⁹

On Christmas Eve, 1901 Thompson, her sister Emma, Emma’s four-year-old son Stanley, and Emma’s husband, Jacob, set out for San Francisco, from where they would sail for China.¹⁰ On February 2, 1902 Thompson and her sister’s family arrived in the British colony of Hong Kong and for the next two years Ida Thompson, sister Emma, and brother-in-law J.N. Anderson, studied the Chinese language in preparation for beginning their mission work in mainland China.

But her attention was not solely focused on language study. In May 1902, just four months after she arrived, Thompson – who adopted the Chinese name of Tan Ai De () - began teaching two local men in Hong Kōng.¹¹ There was a need for English teachers and Thompson reasoned that she, “might as well help a number in that same time,” rather than focus just on those two men. After securing the help of another Adventist missionary,

Abram LaRue, and brother-in-law J. N. Anderson, Thompson was able to secure use of a teaching space, desks, and other teaching implements.¹² The English Conversation School proved popular and enrollment quickly rose to capacity and “many were turned away.”¹³ But in August 1903 Thompson contracted malaria and was forced to close the school. Although she considered re-opening after she recovered, Thompson later wrote, “We did not feel it profitable to start the school again, as I wanted to get into China to work among the women as soon as possible.”¹⁴

And the real work was on the mainland. In June 1903 Ida left Hong Kong and arrived in Canton (today's Guangzhou,) in South China and immediately began planning to open a girls' school.¹⁵ By mid-March 1904 Thompson had already admitted twenty-four students and the school was at capacity; on March 17 the school held their first classes, with Thompson as the only teacher.¹⁶

Thompson named the school Bethel Girls' School after Bethel Academy in her home conference, because it was this conference who had sponsored her mission work. Of the name, Thompson wrote, “This name was adopted in compliment to my native state... This is Wisconsin's School.”¹⁷ Bethel Girls' School was the first Adventist school in Chinese-speaking Asia. Miss Ida Thompson was both the founder of this school and its first principal. The Bethel Girls' School has changed names and locations over the last century, but today it exists as Hong Kong Adventist College.

Miss Thompson was principal of Bethel until 1909 when she returned to the United States on furlough. During part of her furlough she was enrolled in a course at the University of Chicago, having arrived in Illinois by August.¹⁸ What course she took is unknown, but it seems to have been perhaps only a few classes or a short certificate course because by May of 1910 Ida was a resident at the Battle Creek Sanitarium with her sister Emma Anderson.¹⁹ The Andersons had left China due to Emma's health and, it seems, Ida may have also suffered from health problems. Signs of trouble appeared as early as 1901 on her initial voyage to Asia when her ship stopped in Hawaii on the way to the mission field. In May of 1910 the *Lake Union Herald* reported that Ida was at the sanitarium and that her health was improving enough to soon return to China.²⁰ When she sailed for China in September 1910, sister Gertrude was with her.²¹

Mabel Gertrude Thompson was Ida's younger sister by eleven years. She appears to have preferred use of her middle name, rather than Mabel. Gertrude was born December 1, 1881, in Mauston, Wisconsin, the same town in which Ida was born. Little is known of Gertrude's education prior to her college years; in 1905 she graduated from Union College with a Bachelor in Arts, with a Literary Course as her course of study.²² Shortly after graduating from Union, Gertrude took up a position teaching at Cheyenne River Academy, in Harvey, North Dakota; Gertrude was also the preceptress of the school. But in what seems to have been endemic to the Thompson sisters Gertrude's health prevented her from remaining long at the academy; in 1908 she was found as a patient at the sanitarium in Madison, Wisconsin.²³ By late 1909 she was in California “assisting” her brother, a physician in Burbank.²⁴ Apparently well enough to engage in foreign missions, Gertrude had been

commissioned to replace Ida as principal of Bethel Girls' School and in October of 1910 she entered Canton.²⁵

Once in Canton, Ida reported being happy to again be in China, but the stay in Canton was a short one. Whether for health reasons, civil unrest in Canton and which ultimately led to the Chinese Revolution of 1911 – or for other reasons – Ida and Gertrude were back in Hong Kong by March of 1911. Here, Ida reported with some concern that she and Gertrude had visited a home in Hong Kong whose residents had smallpox.²⁶ By August Gertrude was dead. The cause of death is unknown, but her obituary reported that she died “from fever.”²⁷ The Thompson sisters' mother had also passed away, just a few months prior to Gertrude's death.

Ida did not return to mainland China. She remained in Hong Kong for more than a year and finally returned to the United States in late 1913. For the next two years she was in Wisconsin, again working as secretary for the Wisconsin State Sabbath School Department, but in 1915 she moved to Nebraska. The Anderson family and Ida's father also moved to Nebraska, and the extended family settled in the town of College View. Here, at Union College, Ida enrolled in a literary course, a major of study which is heavy in rhetoric, grammar, literature, and history. At Union College, where her brother-in-law, J.N. Anderson was now a professor, Thompson was leader of the China mission band.²⁸ After completing her course of study at Union College in 1917 Thompson accepted a teaching position at Battle Creek Academy, where she taught seventh and eighth grades, but that position proved temporary and she left Battle Creek in 1918.²⁹

Perhaps not initially planning a return to China, Ida relocated from Michigan to southern California, when she accepted a call to teach at San Fernando Academy, where she was also acting preceptress. But in 1919, apparently still pulled to overseas missions, Thompson accepted a call to return to China where she would resume her role as principal at Bethel, in Canton. At the bottom of the Biographical Information Blank application form Ida filled out for the General Conference on August 4, 1919, she penned the postscript, “I am off for China to-day [sic] in my good health and spirits. Remember me in prayer what I do all I can as well as I should. Ida Thompson.”³⁰

Miss Thompson remained in Canton for four years, during which time her Bethel school merged with the Canton boys' school. The boys' school had opened in 1903 by Edwin Wilbur, only weeks after Bethel had opened. But by the mid-1920s, Thompson had moved on from Canton. She accepted a position as a teacher, and eventually as preceptress, at China Missionary Training College in Chiaotoutseng (), near Shanghai, on the east coast of China. By 1928 Thompson had transferred yet again, this time to the Shanghai Hospital and Sanitarium. Here Ida spent the last years of her life as a missionary; this was her last posting. She retired from missions and sailed for home on June 14, 1931.³¹

Of her service the *China Division Reporter* wrote,

Miss Thompson was among the first to come to this field... We recognize with gratitude the gift from Heaven of ten thousand baptized believers forming the membership of the China church at the time of the departure of

our sister, who, when she entered upon service in this land in 1902, found not one baptized Chinese Seventh-day Adventist in all China.³²

Later Life

Arriving home from China, Ida moved in with her brother, Dr. E. H. Thompson. She lived with Dr. Thompson for the remainder of her life, and on January 20, 1939, at the age of sixty-nine, Ida Elizabeth Thompson passed away in Burbank, California.³³ She had been a missionary for thirty years, twenty-five of which she had served in China.

Summary of Service

Location	Position Held	Dates
Unknown	Teacher / Public school / Unknown	1886 – 1894
Madison, Wisconsin	Secretary for Wisconsin State Sabbath School Department	1994 – 1901
Canton, China	Principal, Bethel Girl's School	1901 – 1909
Canton, China	Principal, Bethel Girl's School	19011 – 1912
Hong Kong	Unknown	1912 – 1913
Battle Creek, Michigan	Battle Creek Academy, Teacher, Grades 7 and 8	1917 – 1918
San Fernando, California	San Fernando Academy / Teacher	1918 – 1919
Canton	Principal, Bethel Girls' School	1919 – 1922
Canton	Preceptress, Canton Middle School	1922 – c.1923
Chiaotoutseng, China	Teacher / Preceptress, China Missionary Training College (formerly Shanghai Missionary College)	c.1923 – 1928
Shanghai, China	Preceptress, Shanghai Hospital and Sanitarium	1928 – 1931

SOURCES

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NOTES

1. "Ozro Bingham Thompson," Werelate.org, accessed September 25, 2020, [https://www.werelate.org/wiki/Person:Ozro_Thompson_\(2\)](https://www.werelate.org/wiki/Person:Ozro_Thompson_(2)).
2. 1870 US Federal Census, Year: 1870; Census Place: Lindina, Juneau, Wisconsin; Roll: M593_1720; Page: 61A; Family History Library Film: 553219, acnextry.com, publisher location Provo, UT.; "Biographical Information Bank," Ida Elizabeth Thompson Service Record, North American Division of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventist Archives. Box, WH 2516, Folder, Personal Information Forms and Biographical Material, -- 1950, T to Tho.; According to Ozro's second great-grandson, Ozro sent his daughters to college in Illinois, see Denny Thompson's "Andrew Austin Thompson," Rootsweb, accessed September 25, 2020, <https://sites.rootsweb.com/~wijuneau/AAThompson.html>.
3. "Biographical Information Bank," Ida Elizabeth Thompson Service Record, North American Division of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventist Archives. Box, WH 2516, Folder, Personal Information Forms and Biographical Material, -- 1950, T to Tho.
4. Ida's sister, Mabel Gertrude attended college in Michigan immediately after high school. "Obituaries, Mabel Gertrude Thompson," *ARH*, February 13, 1913, 22.
5. "Biographical Information Bank."
6. Ibid.
7. W.S. Shreve and S.D. Hartwell, "Wisconsin Conference and Camp Meeting," *ARH*, July 16, 1901, 462.

8. Another Adventist missionary, Abram LaRue, had arrived in China several years prior, but LaRue was a self-supporting missionary. And yet another, Edwin and Susan Wilbur, arrived in Hong Kong after Thompson and the Andersons, but was the first to actually live in China.
9. "Ida Elizabeth Thompson," Chinese SDA History, Samuel C.S. Young, ed., accessed September 25, 2020, <https://www.chinesesdahistory.org/ida-elizabeth-thompson>.
10. Emma Anderson, *With our Missionaries in China* (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Publishing, 1920), 15.; Emma T. Anderson, *A'Chu and Other Stories* (Takoma Park, Washington D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Assn), 26.
11. Ida E. Thompson, "Our School Work in China," *ARH*, June 2, 1904, 22.
12. Ibid. The Mexican dollar was the global currency in the early 1900s and was frequently cited by missionaries in periodicals when relating costs to readers in their home country.
13. Mrs. J. N. Anderson, "Some Missionary Experiences," *Youth Instructor*, February 5, 1903, 1; J. N. Anderson, "Our Years in China," *ARH*, June 9, 1904, 14; Ida E. Thompson, "Our School Work in China"; Ida E. Thompson, "Our School Work in China," 22.
14. Ida E. Thompson, "Our School Work in China," 22.
15. Ibid.
16. E. H. Wilbur, "Hong Kong, China," *The Workers Bulletin*, April 5, 1904, 154; "A Chinese School," *Signs of the Times*, June 1, 1904, 13; Ida E. Thompson, "Our School Work in China," *ARH* 81 no. 22 (June 1904) 22.
17. Handel Luke, "A History of Seventh-day Adventist Higher Education in the China Mission, 1888-1980." PhD diss., Andrews University, 1982, 130, accessed June 26, 2020, <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1533&context=dissertations>.
18. "Northern Illinois," *Lake Union Herald*, October 27, 1909, 8; W.E. Straw, "Northern Illinois Camp Meeting," *Lake Union Herald*, August 11, 1909, 6.
19. C. McReynolds, "From the Field: Elder Olsen's Trip Through Wisconsin," *Lake Union Herald*, May 25, 1910, 3.
20. Ibid.
21. *ARH*, September 22, 1910, 24.
22. "Graduating Exercises at Union College," *The Educational Messenger*, June 1, 1905, 3.
23. "News and Notes," *The Educational Messenger*, February 7, 1908, 4; O.J. Graf, "Sheyenne River Academy," *Northern Union Reaper*, March 12, 1907, 12.

24. "News and Notes," *The Educational Messenger*, April 29, 1909, 12.
25. "Word From China," *Youth Instructor*, September 12, 1911, 16.
26. "China," and "General News," *Newsletter for the Asiatic Division*, April 1, 1912, 3, 5.
27. *ARH*, October 3, 1912, 24.
28. Maybelle Miller, "Mission Bands in Union," *The Educational Messenger*, November 1, 1916, 16.
29. "Biographical Information Bank"; *The Educational Messenger*, September 1, 1917, 18.
30. "Biographical Information Bank." Thompson departed on August 6, 1919, although the form is dated August 4.
31. H. W. Miller, "To All Workers and Church Members in the China Division," *China Division Reporter*, January 1, 1931, 1; Marcella Lynch, "Edwin Hymes Wilbur, 1869-1914," accessed October 2, 2020, <https://ccah-collection.weebly.com/wilburEH>.
32. "Departures," *China Division Reporter*, August 1, 1931, 8.
33. "A Pioneer at Rest," *China Division Reporter*, February 1, 1939, 7.

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