

Dick, Everett Newfon (1898–1989)

SABRINA RILEY

Sabrina Riley was born in Auburn, New York and raised in Dowagiac, Michigan. She received a B.A. in history from Andrews University and an M.A. in information and libraries studies from the University of Michigan. Riley was a member of Andrews University's library staff from 1998 to 2003, library director and college archivist at Union College from 2003 to 2016, and is presently a freelance researcher, author, and information professional.

Everett Newfon Dick, an Adventist historian, educator, administrator, and fundraiser, was born on July 10, 1898, in Ozawkie, Kansas. He was the youngest of Grandville Gentry and Hannah Frances Smalley Dick's (1859-1956; 1860-1934) four sons.

Dick's brother Ernest Delbert Dick served as Secretary of the General Conference from 1936 to 1952. His brother, Arthur C. Dick, was the father of Adventist pastor and educator Avery Varner Dick and grandfather of Ardis Dick Stenbakken, former Women's Ministry Director for the General Conference.

Although both of Dick's parents were born in Kentucky, his father was of Scotch-Irish descent and his mother's family hailed from New England. The Dick family made several moves west from Kentucky to the Missouri-Kansas frontier before Everett Dick's birth. In 1908, the family finally settled near La Harpe, Kansas, where they raised Hereford cattle. The Dicks joined the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Ozawkie, Kansas, in 1889, just before construction began on Union College in Lincoln, Nebraska. The Dick family supported Union College from the beginning, and their loyalty continued for three generations.

Dick attended Union College Academy for one year and then returned home to Kansas where he continued his education at Oswego Academy (Kansas Conference school). His senior year was interrupted by World War I. Dick volunteered for service in the Marine Corps. After basic training at Parris Island, South Carolina, his unit was assigned to Quantico, Virginia, and Indian Head, Maryland, where they tested various types of ordinance. Dick



Everett Dick inspecting Hawaiian cadets at Camp Erdman.

Photo courtesy of Union College Heritage Collection.

never saw combat duty, but he did earn a sharpshooter's medal for proficiency with a rifle.¹ After his discharge from the Marine Corps, Dick returned to Oswego Academy where he completed high school in May 1919.

Upon completing high school, Dick enrolled at Union College, but financial difficulties dictated that he dropped out of school after one year. In the summer of 1920, Dick worked as a railway mail clerk. After riding trains through Texas and California, he stopped in Montana to teach school on the Burt Ranch, 90 miles east of Helena, Montana. In Montana he met old-timers, cowboys, and sheepherders who loved to share their stories. These stories inspired Dick's later work as a historian. In 1922, Dick was able to return to Union College and finally earned a bachelor's degree in history in 1924, despite another prolonged absence—again teaching in Montana, this time in Castle—in 1923.

Dick married fellow student and Kansan Opal Elree Wheeler (1901-1984) on August 15, 1923. Having been trained to as a teacher but denied a Kansas teacher's license because she would not take the exam on Sabbath, Opal enrolled in the commercial (business) major at Union College. Opal proved not only to be a devoted wife, mother, talented teacher, capable secretary, and writer in her own right, but also a valued research assistant for Dick's historical writing and unpaid secretary for the Medical Cadet Corps.² The couple had three children. Donald David (1932-2012) became a professor of communication at Southern Adventist University. Lorle Ann (1934-living) married George Edward Stacey, Jr. and together the couple served the Adventist Church in South America for many years. Arthur Lynn became a physician.

Dick registered for graduate studies at the University of Nebraska in the summer of 1924, studying under John D. Hicks. He completed a Master of Arts degree in 1925 with the thesis, "The Long Drive," which was later published by the Kansas State Historical Society.³ Dick taught history and served as boys' dean at Oak Park Academy in Nevada, Iowa, from 1926 to 1928. He then began doctoral work at the University of Wisconsin under Frederic Logan Paxson in September of 1928. Dick chose the Millerite Movement for his dissertation subject and following Paxson's advice took the first of many research trips to visit sites associated with his research and to seek out original sources. Dick completed his dissertation, "The Adventist Crisis, 1831-1844"⁴ and was granted his doctorate in the spring of 1930. That fall he joined the faculty of Union College.

With the exception of leaves of absence from 1940-1942 and 1951-1958, Everett Dick worked for Union College for the rest of his life. He never officially retired. Instead, as his teaching duties diminished, Dick focused on his research and writing, and began fundraising for Union College. During his tenure at Union College, Dick's many positions included professor of history (1930-1989), faculty advisor for the student newspaper *The Clocktower*, summer school director (1932-1942), chairman of the history department, academic dean (1942-1944), and research professor of American history (1946-1989).

Despite a heavy teaching load and lack of research funds from Union College, Dick was a determined and prolific writer. Between 1931 and 1986 he wrote more than a dozen books and articles documenting the history of the Great Plains and then extending into the Rocky Mountains from exploration to the end of the frontier era. Two

titles celebrated the history of Union College at its 50th and 75th anniversaries. Dick also continued to write about Adventist pioneers for church magazines. He was the recipient of a number of research grants that helped fund his work. These included grants from the Social Science Research Council (1938), the Rockefeller Foundation (1943-45), Woods Foundation research grant (1965), and the United States Office of Education (1970). He also received fellowships from the University of Wisconsin (1946-47) and the Newberry Library (1948-49). In 1969 he received the Huntington Library Research Award.⁵

For most people, Dick's teaching and writing agenda would have provided a full life. But in 1933, he was among a number of faculty members increasingly concerned about what would happen to the church's young men in the event of another world war. His concern led to action and in January 1934 Dick took the lead in Union College's Medical Corps, a program later adapted by the General Conference with the name Seventh-day Adventist Medical Cadet Corps (MCC). From 1940 to 1942, Dick directed the MCC first in the Midwest and then nationally. When the MCC was reactivated in 1950, Dick became the director of an internationally active MCC program, a position he held until 1958. During this time, Dick made three trips to the Far Eastern Division where he organized and inspected MCC units, and in 1953 visited Adventist American troops on the front lines in Korea. In addition, he traveled extensively across the United States in support of the MCC. However extensively he traveled, the MCC was managed from an office in his Lincoln, Nebraska, home.

Upon his return to Union College Dick continued to teach, but both his writing and his work with the Medical Cadet Corps ensured that he remained a public figure. He was in demand as a visiting professor spending terms at the University of Missouri, University of Wisconsin, and University of California at Berkeley. In 1967, Andrews University presented Dick with an honorary LL.D. in recognition of both his outstanding scholarship and significant leadership of the MCC.

As Dick reached retirement age, his teaching load decreased. But rather than formally retire, he began to work with Union College's development team in raising funds for a new capital campaign. Work in which Opal, as usual, joined him until her death on September 4, 1984. Dick married a widow, Blanche Gilbert Moore (mother of Marvin Moore, editor of the *Signs of the Times*), on August 10, 1986. Not quite three year later, Everett Dick died on January 16, 1989.

Contributions

Dick was a master storyteller, gaining nearly legendary status in Union College lore with the nickname "Mr. Union College." Wherever he spoke, whether classroom, church, or other venue, his presentation was engaging and memorable. Students took equal pride in the success of Dick's writing career. The love and respect he earned from his students became a lifelong memory for them, the topic of alumni homecoming weekend conversations. And it was students wishing to honor Dick that led to the publication of a festschrift in his honor in 1973.⁶

It was the same mastery of descriptive storytelling that made Dick's writing successful. Mentored by historians John D. Hicks and Frederic Logan Paxson, Dick was thoroughly versed in the theories of Frederick Jackson Turner, and his research supported Turner's "Frontier Thesis."⁷ The value of Dick's work was not in its originality, but in the richly detailed descriptions of social life on the frontier and Great Plains. Rather than sustained narratives from start to finish, Dick's books consisted of a series of narratives tied together by a theme, much like a group of snapshots that together tell a larger story. Widely reviewed in academic journals during his lifetime, two books, *Sod-House Frontier* and *Vanguards of the Frontier*, even reached the attention of the *New York Times* in 1937 and 1941. Dick's work continues to be an authority on the history of the Great Plains although his legacy is mixed. His depiction of women has not held up under feminist scrutiny. But his analysis of other issues like the range wars and public administration of federal land is still respected. In recent years his books and articles have been cited in publications as wide ranging as *The Historian*, the *Yale Law Review*, and the *Journal of the Southwest*⁸

It is ironic that Dick's most original work was the least acknowledged during his lifetime. Dick's doctoral dissertation on the Millerite Movement was written before its time. His efforts at critical academic study of the church's history were discouraged by the apologetic nature of Adventist historiography in the 1920s and 1930s. In fact, his dissertation was not well received by Adventists until it was finally republished as a book in 1994.⁹

Dick's leadership of the Medical Cadet Corps, under the auspices of the Adventist Serviceman's Organization, was his greatest contribution to the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Once again, his narrative skill communicated a vision, which in collaboration with Carlyle B. Haynes' administrative abilities, resulted in a strong and well-connected program of pre-induction medical military training supported by both Adventists and the military establishment. Thousands of young Adventist men were trained in the program around the world and as a result were able to serve their countries without violating conscience.

Despite the stature of his career, Dick remained a humble person, ever devoted to his first love, Union College. When the General Conference demanded that he move to Takoma Park, Maryland, in order to continue his work with the Serviceman's Organization and the MCC, he resigned rather than leave Lincoln, Nebraska. This man who co-labored with the highest-ranking leaders of the Adventist Church, who courted the acquaintance of military officers for the benefit of the MCC, and who called nationally renowned historians his friends, was content to quietly teach at a small Midwestern college.

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NOTES

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