



SOLUSI PEANUT CROP: M. C. STURDEVANT SITTING,
V. WILSON STANDING

ARAI1909-P33-01

Melvin C. Sturdevant (sitting), V. Wilson (standing) with Solusi peanut crop.

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

Sturdevant, Melvin C. (1865–1933)

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Melvin C. Sturdevant was an American Seventh-day Adventist pioneer missionary to Southern Africa.

Early Life (1865-1892)

Melvin C. Sturdevant was born near Onarga, Illinois, USA, on April 5, 1865. He joined the Methodist church at the age of nine.¹ In 1879, he left his former church to join the Seventh-day Adventist church with his eldest brother and father. On September 14, 1886, he married Maggie Foreman. The family was blessed with two boys, but unfortunately both died young. The second born died in infancy, while the elder son, Jonathan G. Sturdevant, died at Solusi Mission, Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, on October 2, 1903, when he was 13. While Melvin's educational qualifications are not clear, his commitment, courage, and passion for mission qualified him to serve African mission work at Solusi Mission and Tsungwesi Mission.

Early Career and Ministry (1892-1902)

From 1892 to 1902, Sturdevant and his family worked in Tennessee, where he canvassed. He also worked at a Seventh-day Adventist Academy in Graysville, Rhea County, Tennessee, where he experienced persecution. On March 1, 1895, the school was closed and G. W. Colcord, the principal, I. C. Colcord, one of the teachers, and M. C. Sturdevant, manager of the boys' dormitory, were arrested.² These, along with eight others, had been indicted in November by the grand jury of Rhea County for violation of the Sunday law. Nine of them, including Sturdevant, were tried on March 5 and 6 and were committed to prison on March 8 for terms ranging from 20 to 80 days.³ Later Sturdevant worked in Alabama and in Atlanta among the colored people. According to R. Steven Norman III, Sturdevant reported in 1900, "There is an abundance of work to be done in this place, and we are encouraged."⁴

Solusi Mission (1902-1910)

On March 5, 1902, Sturdevant accepted a call by the church to go to South Africa. He left New York by ship and arrived in Cape Town on April 1. He and his family rested for one week at the Cape, staying with church members, and later proceeded to Solusi Mission, arriving there on April 17, 1902. One year after his arrival he reported that there was "much fever among the children, but God has blessed our water treatments to the recovering of all without a drop of quinine. The natives outside of our station say there has never been so much fever in one season."⁵ But to their encouragement, evangelistic efforts were yielding positive results as evidenced by the baptism of 12 young men and women on Sabbath, June 18, 1904, witnessed by 250 local people raising the church membership to 63.⁶

He was superintendent of Solusi Mission from 1904 to 1909 with impressive results. In 1904 the mission did not yet have a permanent church building. Sturdevant and his male students produced 84,000 thousand bricks for the construction of the building. Soon the construction work was complete at a total cost of only 15 pounds, and

W. S. Hyatt, the president of the South African Union went to Solusi to assist in the dedication.⁷

According to William H. Branson,⁸ Sturdevant gave the following report:

By the time we left this mission [Solusi Mission] in 1910, to go further inland, our boarding students numbered 100, our day school students nearly 200 and we had started 12 out schools. Several of our trained teachers had been called to help at other mission stations. By this time we had also baptized 150 natives, who were living devoted lives and our regular attendance at the Sabbath services had reached 300. On Sabbath afternoons, some of the teachers and older students (about twenty years) would go out and hold meetings in the near-by kraals. In this way we were all sowing the seed for a harvest in the rising generation.⁹

Sturdevant was an adventurous, brave, and eager man who opened many schools outside the mission post in 1907. At the end of 1908 he was elected to serve on the South African Union Conference Executive Committee.¹⁰ In 1909 he reported that Solusi Mission had only an average number of boarding students, but school attendance had been the best they had in years.¹¹ Some of the leaders of the outlying schools included Victor Wilson, accompanied by two local teachers: J. R. Campbell, also supported by two native teachers, and C. R. Sparrow, supported by one native teacher. Boarding students at Solusi Mission were older boys and girls on whom their hopes depended. Sturdevant taught one Zulu class and the general Bible class when he was at home.¹²

There were heartbreaking years when drought struck and they had to plant crops over and over again. In 1907 Sturdevant reported that locusts were hatching out like the sands of the sea, and the following year he destroyed 27 swarms.¹³ Also during 1907, Sturdevant made a trip into the northwest above the Zambezi River into northern Rhodesia (Zambia), 200 miles north of Rusangu Mission in search of a site where he hoped to establish a mission station. He located a splendid site at Mwembeshi where people pleaded with him to remain.¹⁴ Ten years later, S. M. Konigsmacher would establish Musofu Mission further north near the Congo border.

During the fourth session of the South African Union Conference, held from December 24, 1908 to January 3, 1909, it was reported that he would open a new mission in Mashonaland, Rhodesia.¹⁵ At that same meeting he was granted the ministerial credentials. Later that year he traveled to Mashonaland to search for a site to establish a mission station that later became known as Tsungwesi Mission (later known as Nyazura Mission).

Nyazura (Tsongwesi) Mission (1910-1913)

In 1910 Sturdevant left Solusi Mission to open Nyazura Mission in east Zimbabwe. Well before that time he had researched the area and inspected the farm land. His plan was to establish an industrial school which would help modernize the country and would be an evangelistic center for the Mashonaland residents. It is this determination that caused him to write a letter to the Director of Land Settlement in Salisbury, Rhodesia, on March 21, 1910, in which he stated his objectives for the mission he desired to open.

Our desire is to open up an industrial mission school for natives such as we are now operating in Matebeleland. The principle industry must necessarily be to teach, through farming and gardening, stock raising and dairy work, building work, etc., such as we are able to find work to do. Sewing and all kinds of domestic work for girls. And if possible other industries as fast as we are able to introduce them, besides the usual education of books and general line of study for natives. We hope in a short time to make our work self-supporting. Therefore, we desire not less than a farm of from three to four thousand morgen. We ask if possible a free grant of this land as given to other denominations and ourselves in Matebeleland allowing a nominal yearly rent or tax.¹⁶

On April 16, 1910, the acting director of land settlement, W. Frank, wrote a supporting letter that was of great importance to the granting of Nyazura Mission. He wrote favorably of the work Adventists were doing, which, besides educational instruction, trained its male pupils in agricultural work and its female pupils in sewing and domestic service. He also emphasized that the general training of the mission appeared to be beneficial in the direction of the civilization and Christianizing of the natives. Frank's only objection, from a native administration point of view, was the observation of the Sabbath day, which he thought tended to cause confusion in the native mind.

Meanwhile, the inspector for land settlement had replied to Elder Sturdevant's letter saying that one of the farms was already acquired, the Tsungwesi source. Nevertheless, the church agreed to acquire Tsungwesi ridge though it was considered small for the intended use. Sturdevant informed R. C. Porter, the South African Union Conference president about this offer of sale of the farm that formerly belonged to Mr. Folks, at two million shillings per acre.¹⁷ Since the South African Union Conference had no funds, Pastor Porter wrote to the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists in America, asking for funds. The General Conference Committee was not prepared to buy another large mission farm in Africa.

In view of this dilemma, Sturdevant suggested on June 14, 1910, that since the church had no money for buying the land, it would therefore be best to exchange a 600 Morgan (514.2 hectares/4,000 acre) Solusi farm for Nyazura. On September 6, 1910, Brownle, the secretary for the BSAC, communicated to Elder Sturdevant that the board had approved a free grant of land to the SDA Mission, a farm of 1,833 morgen in Makoni district of Mashonaland, on condition that the mission abandon an equal portion of the farm it held in Matebeleland.

On September 19, 1910, Sturdevant wrote a letter of acceptance, highlighting that though he had wanted more land, he accepted the smaller part. He also accepted the idea of abandoning an equal portion of the farm they held in Matebeleland, marking the beginning of Nyazura Mission. The news of the grant of the farm was received with excitement by Sturdevant's colleagues.¹⁸ To support the opening of the new mission in Umtali (Mutare), the Solusi Mission generously donated 100 pounds which Sturdevant invested in a span of donkeys.¹⁹

In the last week of September 1910, Sturdevant, his wife, and 12 African helpers, who included Emory Mlalazi, began the journey to Nyazura Mission on foot with one American wagon, 12 donkeys, a few fowls, and the household goods. They arrived there on November 6. Tsungwesi Ridge Farm (3,666 acres) known as Folks Farm

was renamed Mutungwazi Mission in 1910, and then changed to Tsungwesi Mission in 1911. The rainy season was near so the missionaries were happy to take advantage of the four huts left by Mr. Folks, the original farm owner. The huts only needed a renewal of the grass thatched roofs to afford temporary shelter. A plow, harrow, hoes, and axes were purchased, and the clearing of land began immediately, as it was a wooded tract of land. During the first season, 18 acres were planted with crops.

According to King, "The pioneer of this new venture experienced most difficulties in opening up new work in Rhodesia. Attacks from lions and inevitable disease added to the hard work and long hours necessary, made life a heavy burden, and it was obvious that help was urgently needed."²⁰ Sturdevant organized hunting expeditions for the beasts, and when one lion charged at him, he shot five bullets at it and in seconds before it attacked him it fell at his feet.²¹ However, January 1911 saw the opening of the mission with 12 students boarding at the mission, and this number later increased to 73, out of which 40 were boarders by 1912.

In the second season, 60 acres were planted because the government had lifted the cattle quarantine, and the mission bought cattle to use for plowing. Elder Sturdevant was a hard worker, a very innovative man, and a powerful evangelist. The new mission was built. The students worked in the fields east of Matukashiri Mountain and produced enough food for the boarders. Nyazura became an industrial education school as earlier proposed in his application letter. Just as he had done at Solusi, he planted fruit trees and developed orchards. He built houses roofed with iron sheets in 1911, after molding bricks with the help of his students.

Eventually a new school building (7.3m x 13.5m) was constructed using poles, plastered with mud, and roofed with grass. Seats were constructed with bricks and plastered with mud. A dining hall with an iron roof was also constructed. He built traditional style houses of poles and mud, and roofed them with grass for workers. Girls and boys were taught appropriate manual work. The students were trained in basic Christian values. He bought cattle in 1912 and built lion-proof cattle kraals and mule stables, making Tsungwesi Mission a successful mission farm.

The mission needed a lot of laborers. As more workers joined the mission, development started to take place and the excitement among the local people increased. Sturdevant went on furlough in late 1912, leaving C. Lynn Bowen in charge. Following the death of Bowen in 1913, as Sturdevant and his wife were returning to Tsungwesi Mission aboard the steamship *Cedric* from a short furlough in the United States, F. Burton Jewell, his wife, and their little son, accompanied them into the African mission field.²² Mrs Sturdevant's contribution at Tsungwesi Mission centered on caring for the mission workers whose health broke down from over work. Sturdevant observed, "My own health finally gave way. It is marvelous how Mrs. Sturdevant has stood the work, sometimes caring for three sick ones at a time, and looking after the general work of the mission alone."²³

His Later Life (1913-1933)

After his health broke down from long years of strenuous mission service, Sturdevant held evangelistic meetings for Europeans in the cities of South Africa and Southern Rhodesia.²⁴ In 1915, he and wife went to South Africa to work among the natives around Johannesburg. But his heart remained in Southern Rhodesia in the little town of Mutare, 44 miles from Tsungwesi Mission.²⁵ Sturdevant made a telling impact on the city of Mutare. The city's population was only 700. He entered the city with papers and books, the simple old plan of entering towns. His labors were blessed of God according to Pastor U. Bender's assessment.²⁶ A number of people became interested in the Adventist message. Elnora V. Jewell reports of a baptism of 22 members on Sabbath morning, March 3, 1917, at Tsungwesi Mission.²⁷

Elder Sturdevant returned to Nyazura Mission towards the end of 1913, but only stayed a few weeks. According to oral tradition, upon his return and brief rest, Elder Sturdevant saw, in what seemed to be a vision, the same black girls he had seen in the United States of America years earlier who had called him to come to Africa and help. The two appeared to have come to buy salt at the tuck-shop, but then they disappeared. Elder Sturdevant satisfied himself that he had come to the place of his call.

Unfortunately, failing health compelled him to give up mission work, surrendering leadership to A. P. Tarr at the beginning of 1914. Elder Sturdevant spent 1915 in Johannesburg where he worked for both Europeans and Africans. At Nyazura, he left 12 newly baptized souls who became the nucleus of the church, 85 head of cattle, and 200 acres of land under cultivation. The number of native huts had increased to more than 20. Other buildings included a church, a school house, a dining hall, a night study room, a storeroom, tool shop, and two standard houses with five rooms each, made of brick, cement floor, and corrugated iron roof. There was also a wagon. His influence was so great such that 100 years later the mission is still known in Shona as *Pachitendendevhiti*.

In May 1916, Elder Sturdevant returned to Zimbabwe and worked at Umtali (Mutare) Mission for three years (1916-1918), where he raised up a white congregation in Greenside suburb. Then, from 1918 to 1929, he worked in South Africa, particularly in Durban, ministering among the Europeans. He later also worked for Indians in Barberton and Williams's Town.

Contribution/Legacy

Virgil Robinson gives us his evaluation of the kind of man Sturdevant was, saying,

Elder Sturdevant was one of the most deeply respected missionaries to labour in Rhodesia, and his converts were the backbone of our native working force for a generation. He had his special place on the mission stations to which he would retire for prayer. A well-worn path leading to this sacred resort was evidence that he met his appointment with God. Without fail on Friday afternoons after the toil of the week was over, and before the beginning of the Sabbath he reported to one of these places.²⁸

In 1929 Elder Sturdevant and his wife finally left Africa for the United States. He spent one year working for the church in Ottawa, Illinois. Since his health continued to deteriorate, he finally retired from the ministry. He died

at his home in Sheridan, Illinois, on August 18, 1933, at the age of 68. The Review and Herald published the following list as the European missionaries to Africa, who lived long enough to see the fruits of their works: M. C. Sturdevant, W. C. Walston, R. P. Robinson, H. M. Sparrow, U. Bender, F. B. Armitage, and W. H. Anderson.

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Accessed July 16, 2018.

NOTES

1. The information in this article closely resembles that found in the article about Nyazura Secondary School in this encyclopedia.
2. W. W. Prescott, "In Prison: Religious Intolerance in Tennessee—An Adventist Academy Closed," *ARH*, March 26, 1895, 204.
3. Ibid.
4. R. Steven Norman III, *The Intriguing Journey of a Remarkable City*, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Bulletin 1, Atlanta, 2010.
5. M. C. Sturdevant, "Matebele Mission," *ARH*, July 1903, 15.
6. W. S. Hyatt and M. C. Sturdevant, "A Baptismal Service at the Bulawayo Mission," *ARH*, November 10, 1904, 17.
7. Robinson, *Third Angel Over Africa*, 141-142.
8. William H. Branson, *African Division Outlook*, 1925, 25.
9. Antonio Pantalone, *An Appraisal of the Development of Seventh-day Adventist Mission in South Africa: A Missiological Evaluation*, MA Dissertation. University of Durban-Westville, 1996, 72.
10. R. C. Porter, "South African Union Conference," *ARH*, February 18, 1909, 18.
11. M. C. Sturdevant, "South Africa," *ARH*, January 7, 1909, 17.
12. Ibid.
13. Virgil Robinson, *Third Angel Over Africa*, Takoma Park, MD, 1954, 140.
14. Robinson, *Third Angel Over Africa*, 163.
15. "The South African Union Conference," *ARH*, March 11, 1909, 15.

16. "Letters of M. C. Sturdevant," Zimbabwe National Archives, 1910; See also, M. C. Sturdevant, "Solusi Mission," *ARH*, December 22, 1910, 16.
17. Robinson, *Third Angel Over Africa*, 150.
18. T. J. Gibson, "Somabula Mission," *The South African Missionary*, October 31, 1910, 2.
19. "Notes," *The South African Missionary*, October 31, 1910, 4.
20. J. King, *Adventist Missions*, Zimbabwe National Archives, 1959.
21. Robinson, *Third Angel Over Africa*, 150-151.
22. "Editorial," *ARH*, August 28, 1913, 24.
23. Melvin C. Sturdevant, "Tsongwesi Mission, South Africa," *ARH*, November 5, 1914, 12.
24. Robinson, *Third Angel Over Africa*, 121.
25. *Ibid.*, 153.
26. U. Bender, "Umtali," *The South African Missionary*, April 23, 1917, 2.
27. Elnora V. Jewell, "Tsongwesi," *The South African Missionary*, April 23, 1917, 2.
28. Robinson, *Third Angel Over Africa*, 153.

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