

Youngberg, Norma Ione (1896–1984)

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Norma Ione Youngberg was a poet, creative writing teacher, prolific author, and pioneering Adventist missionary in Borneo—the third-largest Island in the world, which is now politically divided among three countries: Indonesia, Brunei, and Malaysia.

Early Life

Norma Ione Youngberg was born May 24, 1896, in Sutherland, Iowa, United States,¹ to William Berton “Bert” Rhoads (August 21, 1871-December 1, 1967) and Mary Ellen Rowland Rhoads (January 3, 1876-February 15, 1954).²

Youngberg had three siblings, Ruth Katherine Rhoads Bresee (October 21, 1898-February 6, 1920), James Harrison Rhoads (September 12, 1901-February 13, 1988), and Mildred Rhoads Bennett (September 8, 1909-November 7, 1989).³ Raised in an Adventist home, she was baptized in July 1905 at Elk Point South Dakota by J.W. Christea.⁴

Education and Marriage

Youngberg spent approximately ten years of her education in Adventist schools. From 1904-1909 she attended Elk Point Church School. She spent 1909-1911 at Elk Point Academy, then transferred to Elk Point Intermediate School in the school year 1911-1912. After a year she transferred to Plain View Academy at Redfield, South Dakota, and spent the school years 1912-1913 and 1915-1916 there. She finished two courses, one in Music, which she accomplished in 1913, and one in Academics in 1916.⁵

Youngberg came from a family of educators and writers. Her father, William Bert Rhoads, was a veteran school teacher and wrote several books for children.⁶ Her sister Mildred R. Bennett was a recognized authority on Willa Carter.⁷

Youngberg began her work in the church as she engaged in Bible work in connection with tent efforts in the spring of 1915 and also in 1916 at Sioux Falls, South Dakota.⁸ She married Gustavus Benson Youngberg, whom she met in an evangelistic meeting conducted by Clarence Reubendall in 1915 at Oldham,⁹ on the Christmas Eve of 1916.¹⁰ Norma and Gus had their first child, Ruth, on August 20, 1918.¹¹ The Youngbergs accepted a call to be missionaries in Asia and sailed for Singapore in October 1919.¹² During their few-month stay in Singapore, Norma and Gus had their second child, Robert Raleigh Youngberg, on May 12, 1920.¹³ Their other children included Rhodabelle Youngberg (1922), Ina Madge Youngberg (1924), James Rowland Youngberg (1928), Gustavus Benson Youngberg (1933), and Bruce Youngberg.¹⁴

Ministry

After their short stay in Singapore the Youngbergs headed to Sandakan, North Borneo, in July 1920.¹⁵ Hardship and discouragement emerged as Gus contracted malaria, which had a reoccurring pattern of chill and fever. Norma felt so discouraged that she told Gus she wanted to go home.¹⁶ But discouragement and hardship could not vanquish their love for God and the people of Borneo. They adopted a 15-year-old girl, Loi Khyau.¹⁷ Although criticized by some fellow missionaries, Norma would take care of the sick children that Gus brought home, and nursed them back to health.¹⁸ In Sandakan, the Youngbergs welcomed their third child, Rhodabelle, born October 12, 1921.¹⁹

In late 1924 the Youngbergs were sent to serve the Batak people at Sipogoe in the mountains of central Sumatra.²⁰ Norma and Gus ministered not only to the spiritual needs of the Batak people but also to their physical needs. They worked in the dispensary, tending the people who had toothaches and different kind of worms.²¹

The Youngbergs moved back to Singapore, where Gus took charge of the industrial department at the Malayan Union Seminary.²² Soon after the birth of their son James Rowland, Norma experienced a spiritual revival, an understanding of the message of righteousness by faith. As a result, she called James her “revival baby.”²³ This revival played a crucial role in the couple’s decision to go to a hard place where no one else wanted to go.²⁴

Pioneering Works

The Youngbergs requested that they be assigned to do pioneering work. Accordingly, the mission assigned them to the west coast of Borneo to pioneer work among the Dayak tribes of Sarawak.²⁵ The Youngbergs sailed from Singapore to Kuching, Sarawak, on January 4, 1930.²⁶ At this time, the kingdom of Sarawak was divided between Catholics and the church of England, and the authorities had forbidden any other mission in their territory.²⁷ However, after several meetings, the raja gave Adventists permission to begin mission work in the district of Bintula.²⁸ There Gus opened up a dispensary, which later became instrumental in sharing the Adventist message.²⁹ Norma ministered to the headhunters who had no previous knowledge of God. It was in Sarawak

that the Youngbergs welcomed their sixth child, Gustavus Benson, born in 1933.³⁰

The children were homeschooled in the jungle; but as they were getting older, Norma and Gus thought it would be best if they returned to the United States.³¹ The family returned to the United States in July 1934.³² Norma stayed in the United States for two years, then on August 12, 1936,³³ with her three younger children, joined her husband who had returned to the mission field, Borneo, on October 26, 1935.³⁴ After four years of fruitful labor, the Youngbergs returned to the United States in 1940.³⁵

Husband's Death

Less than a year after their return, they got a call to return to the field, but the government would not issue a passport for children and women because of the ongoing war. Gus had to return to the field alone, without Norma and the children. Norma expected to join him soon, but the Japanese attack on the U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii halted this plan.³⁶

Soon after Gus arrived in Borneo, the Japanese overtook British North Borneo. Norma later learned that Gus had been confined in a Japanese prison since late 1941.³⁷ Communication was extinguished.³⁸ Norma received her last letter wherein Gus wrote, "weather is bad, gardens poor."³⁹ These words suggest that he had been poorly treated. On the occasion of Gus' birthday on July 14, 1944, Norma and the whole household set aside the following week for special prayer. They started with fasting and prayer on Sabbath, the fifteenth of July, and throughout the following week they had special prayer, closing the following Sabbath with further fasting and prayer.⁴⁰ They later learned, on January 22, 1945, that Gus died of septicaemia on July 17, 1944 in the internment camp.⁴¹

Later Life

Youngberg continued to use her gift of writing to inspire others. She became a creative writing teacher at San Jose State University and conducted seminars around the world. She also served as a board member at the Pacific Press. She died on August 20, 1984 at the age of 88 in Loma Linda, California. She was buried in Wyuka, Cemetery in Lincoln, Lancaster County, Nebraska.⁴²

Legacy

Youngberg educated several authors who have become famous for their literary works, including Louise Vernon, Erna Holyer, Eileen Lantry, Louis Schutter, and Lois Prante Stevens.⁴³ The more than 20 years of Norma's labor in Southeast Asia will always be honored. Her poems, articles, and books, full of positivity and love of life, will continue to inspire the present and future generations. She wrote more than 40 books, including *Nyla and the White Crocodile*, *Taught by a Tiger*, *Jungle Thorn*, *Singer on the Sand*, *Fire on the Mountain*, *Under Sealed Orders*, *The Queen's Gold*, *Miracle Song*, *Flee Middle Gardens*, *Miracle in Borneo*, *Creative Techniques for Christian Writers*,

and *Tiger of Bitter Valley*, *Medicinman Finner Sin Vag*, and *Vrajitorul din Insula Marelui Sangir*.⁴⁴

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2. "Norma Ione Rhoads Youngberg," <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/75181386/norma-ione-youngberg>. Accessed June 14, 2022.

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4. Biographical Information Blank, Norma Ione Youngberg, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Archives, Silver Spring, Maryland, U.S.A.

5. Ibid.

6. See the cover page of Norma's book *Tiger of Bitter Valley* (Fort Oglethorpe, GA: TEACH Services, 2001).

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