



Jessie Halliwell
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Halliwell, Jessie Viola (1894–1962)

THE BRAZILIAN WHITE CENTER – UNASP

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Jessie Viola Halliwell,¹ nurse, teacher, and missionary,² was born February 22, 1894, in Nebraska, U.S.A.³ Daughter of the Rowley family,⁴ she married an electrical engineer,⁵ Leo B. Halliwell,⁶ with whom she had two sons: Jack and Marian Halliwell.⁷ Together with her husband, Jessie contributed to the medical missionary work of the Seventh-day

Adventist Church in Brazil.⁸

Around 1911 the Rowley family moved to Odessa, Nebraska. At this time, it was common for families to organize dances for the community. As the Rowleys had just moved to that city, Jessie took the opportunity to participate. She caught the eye of one of the violinists, Leo Blair Halliwell. Without hesitating, the young man accompanied Jessie in a dance, which made his feelings for her grow. After the dance, Leo sought to know her better. When he found out that Jessie worked at a large supermarket in the region, he changed his usual shopping routine so he could see her more often.⁹

They were engaged by the end of the summer. Since Jessie and Leo were quite young, they thought it best to prioritize their studies. They planned to get married after they finished college.¹⁰ While Leo was studying engineering in Lincoln, Nebraska, Jessie took part in a one-week public conference about the Bible. At the end of the meetings, Jessie was baptized and became a Seventh-day Adventist.¹¹

After her conversion, Jessie decided to study nursing at Union College,¹² and living in a nearby Adventist dorm in the same city, her fiancé studied electrical engineering.¹³ The two had plans to wed after Jessie's graduation, except that she would not marry a non-Adventist. So, without understanding the beliefs of Adventists, Leo looked for a Seventh-day Adventist Church so he could be baptized. Thus, on October 1, 1916, Jessie graduated and two days later, she married Leo B. Halliwell.

Since Leo worked in a British factory for war materials in Charles City, Iowa, after their wedding, they moved to that city.¹⁴ In October 1918, while pregnant, Jessie caught the Spanish flu. The nurse that took care of her registered their newborn child as Claris, even though the parents called him Jack.¹⁵

What left Jessie sorrowful in her marriage was Leo's wavering faith.¹⁶ Close to the time that an evangelistic meeting would occur, Leo suffered an accident at work. Therefore, he was dismissed from work for ten days, allowing him to participate in the evangelistic meetings with Jessie. These meetings transformed Leo's life goals, making him yearn to be more than simply an engineer.¹⁷ In the spring of 1920, after reading literature that motivated him to do missionary work, Leo abandoned his job and signed up to serve as a ministerial worker for the conference where he was a member.¹⁸

Jessie and Leo moved to Cedar Falls where they helped organize an evangelistic week. Then they were transferred to Fort Madison, where they were responsible for the churches in that district. After a year of work, they were called to missionary work in Brazil. Since their family members were not Adventists, they were reluctant to see the couple go, but Jessie and Leo accepted the call to serve.¹⁹

On October 15, 1921, Jessie, along with her husband and son, embarked in the transatlantic ship *Aeolus*, bound for Brazil.²⁰ From New York, they traveled to Rio de Janeiro, where they arrived on October 30. Jessie and Leo traveled with many other missionaries, including the Landes couple,²¹ pioneers of Presbyterianism in Brazil.²²

After their arrival in Rio de Janeiro, the Halliwells were sent to the Bahia Mission, where Leo would be president.²³ Because they had not yet learned Portuguese, Gustavo S. Storch was designated to accompany them, since he was fluent in English.²⁴ When they arrived in Salvador, they rented an old loft in the middle of the city.²⁵ However, the absence of financial assistance made the accomplishment of their work much harder. Because of this, and since Jessie was a nurse and specialized in midwifery, she started helping women in labor in that region, looking for the funds to keep the mission going. During this time, very few women had access to hospitals, so Jessie was requested with increasing frequency and, as a result, many people were converted to the Adventist faith.²⁶

After working for two months in Bahia, Jessie discovered that Jack had caught malaria. This worried the missionary couple and motivated them to move to the Bahian coast. As a result, the spread of the disease would slow down and would allow Jack to recover.²⁷ In 1922, Marian was born, the Brazilian in the Halliwell family.²⁸

In 1928, after seven years of contributions to the former Bahia-Sergipe Mission²⁹ whose territory included both of those states, Jessie and Leo were called to work at the Lower-Amazon Mission, which corresponded to the states of Ceará, Piauí, Maranhão, Pará, Amazonas, and Acre.³⁰ Their difficulties increased, especially with regard to transportation between the cities. To get to the countryside, they had to travel in steamboats,³¹ which did not have any kind of security or comfort for passengers.³² After a year of using this type of transportation, the couple talked about the possibility of building their own motorboat.³³ Jessie, while acknowledging their need for a motorboat, pointed to the lack of funds with which to build a boat. During their furlough in 1930, they decided to raise money in the churches and camp meetings that they visited in the United States. By this means, they collected enough to build a motorboat.^{34, 35, 36}

After returning to Brazil, Leo showed his project to Afonso so he would make the new boat. Afonso was the same boat builder who made the motorboat used for canvassing in that region.³⁷ After much effort, in Belém, on July 4, 1931, Jessie inaugurated the motorboat with a bottle of guaraná and christened it Luzeiro I.³⁸ Hence, the boat became a house,³⁹ a school,⁴⁰ a church, and a hospital from which the Halliwells aided communities in the Amazon.⁴¹

Jessie sincerely valued education for children and youth. For the younger ones, she was a teacher, providing basic knowledge. For the older ones, she was a sort of godmother for those who wished to study in college.⁴² Since she had canvassed in the past, she was able to train many young people to gain the means to study through canvassing. When she saw that a student would not be able to raise enough money, she would ask for help from her American friends, from whom she acquired the remainder of the money the student needed to study.⁴³ Consequently, Jessie contributed to many being able to study at Brazil Adventist College who would later on become workers for the

Seventh-day Adventist Church.⁴⁴

A while later a second motorboat was built, called Luzeiro II.⁴⁵ The first boat remained in the care of another American Adventist worker, Fred Pritchard, who worked for the same cause as the Halliwells.⁴⁶

For 24 years (1933-1957) Jessie served the church as a licensed missionary in the Amazon.⁴⁷ In this post she helped people with malaria, hookworm, yaws, kala-azar, leprosy, and tropical ulcers. Even more than this, she saved many from venomous snake bites and assisted many women in labor.⁴⁸ During this time the Halliwell couple noticed a great need to build a clinic in Belém. In 1942 they rented a loft in which the ground floor would serve as a clinic and the upper floor as the doctor's home. In this way, the population that craved the help of a physician ended up receiving spiritual help as well. Medical care provided an open door which caused many to welcome the Adventist faith. Sometime later, the Halliwells realized that just one clinic would not be enough to help everyone. So, in 1951, they raised enough money to buy land in Marco, a neighborhood away from the city, where they built Belém Hospital.⁴⁹ For the next seven years⁵⁰ they continued to use medical work as an opening wedge for their mission work.⁵¹

Their many and diverse contributions brought them notable honors. Before returning to the United States, the Halliwell couple was decorated by the Brazilian government with a Southern Cross National Commendation.⁵² This commendation is voted by the National Congress and bestowed by the President of the Republic, exclusively for foreigners who provide various benefits to the Brazilian population. In Brazil's history, Jessie was the first woman to receive such an honor.⁵³ Afterwards she retired and returned to the US in 1958.⁵⁴

Regardless, her contributions continued through financial help for many students. Even after becoming feeble, she continued to worry about those she had left behind in Brazil.⁵⁵ Her work in the Amazon impacted the people so deeply that the name "Jessie" is common among girls in those communities.⁵⁶ On September 27, 1962, at age 68, she died⁵⁷ because of a disease she acquired after her return to the US.⁵⁸

Jessie Viola Halliwell provided a relevant contribution to the Seventh-day Adventist Church through her medical missionary work as a nurse and a teacher. Through this work she converted many to the Adventist faith and promoted the growth of Adventism in Brazil.

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NOTES

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