Lane (later Risley), Ellen S. Edmunds (1844–1917)

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Ellen S. Edmunds Lane was a temperance speaker, evangelist, nurse, and one of the first women in Adventist history to be licensed as an Adventist minister.

Early Life

Ellen S. Edmunds Lane was born in Saline, Michigan, on June 28, 1844. She was the sixth of seven children in the family of Loring Edmunds (1803–1884) and Marie Murray Edmunds (1812–1882). The family joined the Seventh-day Adventist Church sometime in the 1850s.

Her father was a farmer, her mother a tailor. By the age of 16 Ellen was a schoolteacher. She attended the State Normal School (now Eastern Michigan University), an institution then devoted exclusively to the training of teachers, where she met her future husband, Elbert B. Lane. To be admitted, students of this school had to sign a written statement that they intended to teach school in Michigan, so it is likely that Ellen spent further time teaching after her higher education.

Ministerial Spouse

Ellen and Elbert married in 1865 and purchased a farm in Bedford, Michigan, but did not live there very long. Elbert felt that God was calling him to ministry. At the encouraging of James and Ellen White, Ellen and Elbert sold the farm, and Elbert began to preach. About this time Ellen gave birth to their first child. Elbert began his labors in Michigan, then moved south into Indiana in late 1869. It is unclear whether Ellen traveled with him or stayed home during this time. On July 20, 1870, their child died. If Ellen had not been traveling with Elbert before, it seems that after the death of their child she took to accompanying him in his evangelistic travels.

While in the vicinity of Circleville, Indiana, in late November 1870, Ellen became sick with typhoid and nearly died. Throughout her illness, which lasted more than a month, Elbert was her primary caregiver while also keeping up his schedule of evangelistic meetings.

Sometime during 1873 a daughter, Mina (or Elmina), was born to the Lanes. That year on November 8 Ellen and Elbert made what was intended as a brief stop to encourage a small church in Bowling Green, Ohio. But the local enthusiasm was so great that it was turned into an extended evangelistic campaign that continued until April 5, 1874.

Preaching Partner

It was during this effort that Ellen’s transition from supporting spouse to ministry partner is generally thought to have
taken place. Elbert suffered an attack of diphtheria while there, and as he recovered, Ellen stepped in for him, "opening the meetings and speaking when he was not able." However, the first record of Ellen preaching during one of Elbert’s meetings came nearly two years before. In a report to the *Review and Herald* dated January 27, 1872, Elbert casually mentioned that Ellen had preached during a series of revival meetings in Potterville, Michigan.

The Lanes’ ministry in the Bowling Green area led to numerous conversions and a thriving, growing congregation that numbered close to one hundred. Even more remarkable, according to fellow minister Joseph Clarke, was the Lanes’ effectiveness in disarming the antagonism from other Christian denominations that Adventist evangelizing typically aroused. Clarke wrote that the “greatest benefit” from the Bowling Green campaign was that “prejudice is almost completely extinguished; and a good impression has been made upon the community generally.”

After the Lanes left Bowling Green, reports in the *Review and Herald* mention Ellen’s participation in meetings in Pulaskiville, Ohio (June 1874), the Indiana camp meeting (fall 1874), and meetings in Pine Run, Michigan (April 1875). For the Pine Run meetings the Lanes teamed up with another prominent pioneer evangelist, J. O. Corliss. In the *Review and Herald* Elbert Lane and Corliss reported strong interest in the meetings generally, but singled out the fact that “on the occasion of Mrs. Lane’s first discourse many went away unable to get in.”

In the late spring of 1875 the Lanes decided they needed to spend some time in New England for their health, and worked for the rest of that year in New Hampshire and Massachusetts. While they were there, Ellen is described for the first time as having lectured on temperance (which was to develop into her specialty). Also, on one occasion she stayed in the area of a camp meeting for a week after it closed, working on her own with a small group of new believers “to get them established and in working order.” In validation of her ministerial activities, the Michigan Conference voted to grant Ellen a ministerial license on August 11, 1875, which was renewed annually through 1888. She thus became one of the first women in Adventist history to be licensed as an Adventist minister.

On February 1, 1876, Elbert started work in Virginia, a state in which Seventh-day Adventists had yet to establish a presence. Ellen remained in New England a while longer, giving birth to their son Loring in Rhode Island, before joining Elbert in Virginia by August. Though not without the usual adverse reactions from some clergy of more established denominations, the meetings in Virginia, once well under way, stirred so much interest that Ellen sometimes spoke at satellite venues in order to accommodate more of the many requests for meetings that flooded in.

In Virginia J. O. Corliss again worked with the Lanes. According to Adventist historian A. W. Spalding: “The men bore the chief burden of preaching, but Mrs. Lane, who spoke especially on health and temperance topics, drew the largest crowds.” In one instance “several hundred” attended, and in another, “five hundred.” Ellen also did effective house-to-house work, conducting prayer meetings with people in their homes.

The family settled in Dayton, Virginia, while Elbert continued to travel for meetings. During the winter months, when tent meetings were impossible, the Lanes kept themselves busy by shifting their emphasis to temperance meetings. This less-controversial subject allowed them to rent indoor venues, and Ellen would lead the meetings. Afterward they would sell copies of *Health Almanac*, an annual publication the Adventist Church started in 1875 to counter the “medical” almanacs popular at the time that advised as remedies substances now commonly understood to be narcotics or poisons.

It was necessary for the Lanes to be self-supporting in Virginia, the new churches there not yet having embraced the need to support their ministers financially. This might explain why Ellen returned to teaching school during the winter of 1877–1878 in addition to continuing to preach. In the spring of 1878, with the Adventist Church well established in Virginia, the Lanes concluded their labor there and returned to work in Michigan.

The June 12, 1879, issue of the *Review and Herald* announced that the Michigan Conference was dividing the territory into eight sections and assigning a minister to each, with the direction to focus and contain their efforts to that section. Elbert was given section 3. This plan was refined a year and a half later into 16 districts, of which Elbert and Ellen were assigned districts 1, 2, and 14.

### Solo Ministry

In the summer of 1881 Elbert was working in Camden, Michigan, while Ellen, on her own, held a series in Casnovia, Michigan. On August 6, 1881, Elbert, who had been working despite illness for several weeks, died. Ellen continued working as a district pastor and evangelist. Sometimes she worked with other pastors, but just as often she held meetings of weeks’ or even months’ duration alone. One such series of meetings in Ferry, Michigan, began on April 15, 1883, and lasted until August 13. That effort produced a committed congregation of 21, but when the time came to baptize them, Ellen had to call for a male minister to perform the rite.

In March 1882 Ellen became a charter member of the Michigan Ministerial Association, but her interests seemed to be moving more toward the health and temperance work. In September 1884 she was elected secretary-treasurer of the Michigan Health and Temperance Society, reelected to the same position in 1885, and then elected president of the society in 1886 and 1888. The frequency of her reports in the *Review and Herald* diminished in the late 1880s, and by 1890 she seems to have ceased public ministry in favor of nursing.

### Later Life and Contribution


On October 14, 1901, she married George E. Risley, the owner and operator of a fruit basket factory in Augusta, Michigan. Their marriage lasted until his death on September 10, 1907.

Ten years later a tragic accident at her son Loring’s printing establishment in Battle Creek brought Ellen’s life to an end. A fall down an elevator shaft broke her neck, resulting in her death on November 1, 1917.

Ellen S. Lane’s ministry, both in tandem with her husband and that which she conducted on her own, contributed to the early growth of the Adventist Church and advanced public recognition of its legitimacy as a Christian denomination. More distinctively, she is often cited as a pioneer in the public and ministerial roles of women in the Adventist Church.

**SOURCES**

“Another Death.” *ARH*, August 9, 1881.


Harvey, James. “Indiana Camp-Meeting.” *ARH*, October 20, 1874.


Lane, E. B. “An Address.” *ARH*, June 24, 1875.

——. “Bowling Green Village, Ohio.” *ARH*, May 19, 1874.

——. “Indiana.” *ARH*, January 17, 1871.


——. “Ohio.” *ARH*, December 23, 1873.

——. “Ohio.” *ARH*, February 24, 1874.

——. “Ohio.” *ARH*, June 23, 1874.

——. “Our Almanacs.” *ARH*, March 1, 1877.


Lane, E. B. and E. S. “Closing Labors in Virginia.” *ARH*, May 23, 1878.

——. “Virginia Grove Meeting.” *ARH*, August 3, 1876.

Lane, E. B., and J. Corliss. “New Market, VA.” *ARH*, March 9, 1876.


Lane, Mrs. E. B. “Ferry, Oceana Co.” *ARH*, May 29, 1883.


Lane, Mrs. E. S. “Casnovia.” *ARH*, July 26, 1881.


**NOTES**


4. Ibid.


6. The headstone of the child’s grave is the only official record that remains of him or her, and the upper portion of it is so worn that the child’s name cannot be discerned.


18. E. B. Lane and J. O. Corliss, "New Market, VA," ARH, March 9, 1876, 78.

19. E. B. Lane and E. S. Lane, "Virginia Grove Meeting," ARH, August 3, 1876, 47.

20. J. O. Corliss and E. B. Lane, "Virginia Tent," ARH, September 7, 1876, 86.


22. "Virginia Grove Meeting"; D. M. Canright, "Encouraging Items," ARH, August 10, 1876, 51; E. B. Lane and J. O. Corliss, "Virginia Tent," ARH, August 31, 1876, 78.

23. E. B. Lane, "Our Almanacs," ARH, March 1, 1877, 67.

24. E. B. Lane, "Virginia Tent, No. 2," ARH, August 23, 1877, 70, 71; E. B. Lane, "Virginia," ARH, March 7, 1878, 78.

25. E. B. Lane and E. S. Lane, "Closing Labors in Virginia," ARH, May 23, 1878, 167.


27. D. H. Lamson, E. B. Lane, and M. S. Burnham, "Camden, Hillsdale Co.," ARH, July 26, 1881, 74; Mrs. E. S. Lane, "Casnovia," ARH, July 26, 1881, 75.


29. Mrs. E. B. Lane, "Ferry, Oceana Co.," ARH, May 29, 1883, 349; Mrs. E. B. Lane, "Ferry, Oceana Co., July 2," ARH, July 17, 1883, 460; Mrs. E. B. Lane, "Shelby, Aug. 13," ARH, August 21, 1883, 540.


32. Michigan. Marriage Records, 1867–1952 (Film: 70, Film Description: 1900 Wayne–1901 Chippewa, Michigan Department of Community Health, Division of Vital Records and Health Statistics; Lansing, Michigan, USA).