



Heber H. Votaw.

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

## Votaw, Heber Herbert (1881–1962)

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Heber Herbert Votaw was a minister, missionary, professor, Harding Administration executive, and religious liberty leader.

## Early Years

Heber Herbert Votaw was born in West Mansfield, Ohio, March 3, 1881, to Lewis Votaw and Angelina Curl Votaw. His mother was a Seventh-day Adventist, but his father was not.<sup>1</sup> His siblings included Ella R. Perkins (1861-1883), Edson Benjamin Votaw (1863-1931), and Myrta Votaw Ballinger (1868-1927). Votaw's ancestors were French Protestants who settled among the Quakers of Pennsylvania before the American Revolution.

When he was 17 years old, on October 2, 1898, Votaw was baptized into the Seventh-day Adventist Church, of which his mother and siblings were already members, by E. J. Van Horn in Van Wert County, Ohio.<sup>2</sup> Votaw attended 6<sup>th</sup> thru 9<sup>th</sup> grades at the church-operated elementary school in Battle Creek, Michigan, and 10<sup>th</sup> thru 12<sup>th</sup> grades at Mount Vernon College, Mount Vernon, Ohio.

In 1903, shortly after his high school graduation, Votaw married Phoebe Carolyn Harding, born October 21, 1879, in Caledonia, Marion County, Ohio, daughter of Phoebe Elizabeth Dickerson (1843-1910) and George Tryon Harding Sr. (1844-1928) and younger sister of Warren Gamaliel Harding (1865-1923), and three other brothers and five sisters. Heber and Carolyn Votaw were childless.<sup>3</sup>

From early 1902 through 1903, Votaw was employed as a colporteur and Bible worker/minister in the Ohio Conference. He served as tent master for M. C. Kirkendall and J. O. Miller.<sup>4</sup> Then the Votaws received a letter from the General Conference notifying them that they were selected to be the first Adventist missionaries to Burma.<sup>5</sup>

On October 2, 1904, the Votaws' last Sabbath in their homeland, Heber Votaw spoke at the Elgin, Ohio, Church and received an offering of \$44.75 for his work in South Asia.<sup>6</sup>

On October 13, General Conference and Review and Herald workers witnessed Votaw's ordination. GC President A. G. Daniels offered the prayer and GC Secretary W. A. Spicer delivered the charge. Two days later, the Votaws left New York for India via London on the steamship *Finland* of the Red Star Line. They reached Rangoon on January 14, 1905, and met pioneering colporteurs H. B. Meyers and U Maung Maung.<sup>7</sup> A few days later, Mr. and Mrs. L. F. Hanson arrived to work as colporteurs, living with the Votaws on Brooking Street in Rangoon.

## Burma

The choice of a young, partially educated, untraveled and “unsophisticated” pastor was not unusual. The church was sending many such young couples to major cities across the world with no instruction in missiology and no in-depth exposure to the cultures they would enter. But they went out and successfully started new churches across the globe.

The Votaws followed a common pattern: they immediately started language study and laid plans for a school, a clinic, and publishing work--all in a hot, steamy, tropical climate that had proven hard to take for many of those accustomed to more temperate weather.

Votaw was not one to blindly follow precedent. Most other missionaries in new territory began by working with expats and with locals who spoke English, many of whom were the children of at least one European parent. Votaw did this, but he also looked at the wider picture and did not want his work confined to Rangoon and the Burman people. He contacted a member of the Karen people from northern Burma who had some previous contact with Adventism in India and came to Votaw asking for a worker to be sent to his people. After that, virtually every letter from Votaw to Spicer contained an urgent plea for a worker to be sent to the Karens<sup>8</sup>

Their efforts bore fruit: Soon there was a church of both Europeans and Burmese meeting in mission headquarters (also their residence) in Rangoon.<sup>9</sup> In 1905, Votaw reported that three young men in Burma had begun observing the Sabbath. In 1906, after two full weeks of Bible instruction from Votaw, he baptized “seven Burmese souls.” Votaw also established a church at Moulmein and started Burma’s first manual training school. Assistance was provided by James E. Schultz.

In 1909, there were more than 50 Sabbath School members in Rangoon.<sup>10</sup> That year the Votaws went back to the United States, returning to Burma in April 1910. Alfred H. Williams, who had earlier arrived in Rangoon to work for a British firm and subsequently met the Votaws, was baptized in 1910. That same year he met and married Mabel Harcourt, another early convert who had studied with the Votaws. Williams later became the treasurer of the Southern Asia Division.<sup>11</sup>

By April 1912, attendance in Rangoon had apparently increased substantially as Votaw reported that the meeting hall was being extended to twice its original size, and electric fans were being installed!<sup>12</sup> The congregation then included people from Chinese, Punjabi, Madrasi, Telegu, and European backgrounds as well as Burmese. The following April, the Votaws and Wellmans held meetings in Simla, India. A few months later, H. R. Salisbury arrived to organize a congregation there. That same year, Votaw baptized two Karens, and a mission station was opened in the Shan states,<sup>13</sup> an area that was formerly part of Thailand which Britain annexed to Burma in 1893.<sup>14</sup>

In 1914, a young Indian man named Jonathan arrived in Rangoon along with two brothers, M. Prakasan and M. P. Daniel. All three were baptized and became active in the early Adventist work in India.

## Return to the United States

Soon the Votaws, like so many others, fell victim to the weather and tropical diseases. While Carolyn returned home for recuperation, Heber refused to leave his post. But Carolyn's brother, a physician, wrote to the secretary of the General Conference and told him if they didn't bring the Votaws home immediately, Heber would not survive. Heber sailed for home on July 11, 1914.<sup>15</sup> On their return, Votaw served as an acting pastor in Columbus, Ohio.<sup>16</sup>

In 1915, the Votaws moved to Takoma Park, Maryland, where Heber was in charge of ministerial training at Washington Missionary College (now Washington Adventist University) until 1917.<sup>17</sup> In 1917-18, he assisted his brother-in-law, Dr. George T. Harding Jr., in the establishment of Harding Sanitarium, Worthington, Ohio.

## Warren G. Harding

Carolyn's brother Warren had been moving up politically while the Votaws were in Burma. He was a member of the Ohio Senate from 1900 through 1904, and then served as lieutenant governor of Ohio from 1904 through 1906. He lost an election for governor and went back to Marion, Ohio, where he owned and edited the local newspaper and remained active and well-connected in Ohio Republican circles. He was elected to the United States Senate in 1915 shortly after the 17<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the United States Constitution initiated popular election of senators. He served in the Senate until 1921 when he was inaugurated as the 29<sup>th</sup> president of the United States.<sup>18</sup>

The geographical distance did not lessen contact between Carolyn Votaw and her upwardly mobile older brother. While in Burma, she wrote Warren and urged him to leave politics and enter a more reputable line of work. The advice fell on deaf ears.<sup>19</sup>

## Government Service

The relationship deepened with the Votaws move to Takoma Park. In 1918, Heber went to work for his brother-in-law, first as a clerk, later as assistant clerk for the Senate Committee on the Philippines, which Harding chaired. After becoming president, Harding appointed Heber Votaw to be superintendent of the Federal Bureau of Prisons and chair of the parole board for each prison.<sup>20</sup>

During this time, Carolyn Votaw served as a member of the Women's Bureau of the District of Columbia Metropolitan Police Department, as a probation officer, and director of a program for unwed mothers. In 1920, she was appointed to head the social service division of the United States Public Health Service and was an advisor to the Federal Board of Vocation Education within the Veterans Affairs Bureau,<sup>21</sup> which caused her name to arise during testimony in the prosecution of the Bureau's director, Charles R. Forbes, on corruption charges.<sup>22</sup>

Warren Harding died unexpectedly in San Francisco in 1923 while on a tour of the western states. Shortly before, a close aide shocked him by disclosing details of a number of instances of corruption involving his cabinet members. Whether this contributed to his sudden death is unknown.

Immediately following his death, Harding was hailed as a great president. However, soon the scandals involving his staff broke. The country learned that Forbes, his director of the Veterans Affairs Bureau, had looted the funds of his office and absconded to Paris. Then the Teapot Dome scandal broke, exposing Albert Fall, Harding's secretary of the Interior, as having a central role in the illegal leasing of a naval petroleum reserve in Wyoming for considerable personal gain.

Congressional investigation of the affair brought to light the involvement of Harry Daugherty, Harding's former campaign manager, who he had selected as attorney general. Daugherty was forced from office by Harding's successor, Calvin Coolidge.

As superintendent of Prisons, Votaw answered directly to Daugherty. As Daugherty's political enemies drew him into the congressional investigation of Teapot Dome, charges of corruption at the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary brought Heber Votaw, as prison superintendent, into the investigation. FBI Director William J. Burns, later convicted on corruption charges himself, alleged that Votaw called off an investigation into narcotics smuggling at the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary.<sup>23</sup> Votaw stayed on in his position for another two years during which he was called to testify before Congress about the Atlanta penitentiary matter. He did so successfully, and both he and Carolyn were cleared of any wrongdoing.

Were the Votaws involved in the corrupt actions of the Harding administration? For the answers to these and other questions, the primary author looked at the correspondence between Votaw, General Conference President A. G. Daniels and Secretary William Spicer, which illuminate the personality of Heber Votaw.<sup>24</sup>

As director of the Bureau of Prisons, Heber Votaw worked under the direction of Attorney General A. G. Daugherty as described above. The relationship evinced in their correspondence was formal, correct, and apparently distant. There is no evidence of cordiality or personal friendship. Nor is there evidence that Votaw had any inkling of the corruption with which Daugherty (and other administration figures, including Votaw himself as described above) was charged. In his defense, it should be stated that the president himself seems to have been genuinely surprised when, just before his death, he was made aware of the facts.

The research of the authors in no way casts doubt as to the Votaws' honesty and rectitude. For example, in Burma, Votaw was scrupulous in financial and other record keeping and adherence to standards and policies. They also noted he was not afraid to differ with and even confront his organizational colleagues and superiors. In 1940, *Review and Herald* Editor F. D. Nichol wrote an article that Votaw interpreted (with good reason) as arguing that a vegetarian diet made people more moral. Votaw took issue with this and sent Nichol a seven-page letter stating the reasons he held his position. Perhaps the most interesting is this: "I spent eleven years working among the Buddhists of Burma, virtually all of who are vegetarians, and could discern no difference in

morality between them and others.”

When the Votaws left Burma, they came home, like many missionaries, short on cash. In fact, that they had to ask the GC to advance them funds for the steamship tickets to come home. The house they built in Takoma Park, just across the street from the hospital and college campus, is white-columned and elegant. Where did the money come from? When President Harding died, he left the Votaws \$50,000, a considerable sum in those days, and they used it, at least in part, to build that home.<sup>25</sup> It’s now the residence of the president of Washington Adventist University, and still considered the nicest house in the neighborhood.

## Religious Liberty Advocate

For a year following his departure from government, Votaw worked as a service manager at the Washington Sanitarium.<sup>26</sup> Recognizing the value of his knowledge of government and contacts therein, the General Conference in 1926 elected Votaw to serve as associate director of what was then the Religious Liberty Department. He served in that capacity until 1941 when he became director of that department. From 1941 until 1954, he also served as editor of *Liberty* magazine. During that time, he co-edited *American State Papers and Related Documents on Freedom of Religion* and authored *Your Freedom and Mine*.<sup>27</sup>

Heber Votaw apparently was a quick study. He seems to have immediately applied the knowledge he gained while working in government to the religious liberty problems brought to him in his new position. During the 1930s, these issues often had to do with helping members with immigration matters. In the early war years, he was called on to assist a recent Loma Linda medical graduate who had accepted government money and promised to serve the country as needed. He was then drafted into the military, declined to serve, and Votaw was called on to intercede. Votaw didn’t waste time with sergeants. He had entrée to the offices of general staff officers and used it.<sup>28</sup>

On one occasion, a member of the Capitol Hill Church in Washington called Votaw directly, complaining that, as a janitor at Union Station, she had not been scheduled to work on the Sabbath until the arrival of a new manager. Votaw said, “I know the director of Union Station personally. Let me take care of this.” And he did.<sup>29</sup>

In 1945, Votaw was asked to assist with the repatriation of Adventist missionaries in the Philippines, one of whom was Charles Wittschiebe, later a professor at Andrews University.<sup>30</sup>

Carolyn Votaw died suddenly on October 21, 1951.<sup>31</sup> A few years later, on June 24, 1954, the General Conference Committee voted to allow Heber Votaw to retire.<sup>32</sup> Votaw lived just eight years after retiring, staying in the house he and Carolyn built at 7633 Carrol Avenue in Takoma Park, Maryland, until his death on October 7, 1962, at the age of 81. He and Carolyn are buried in the Fort Lincoln Cemetery, Brentwood, Maryland.<sup>33</sup>

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