

Stewart, Edwin Lincoln (1861–1937)

DOUGLAS MORGAN

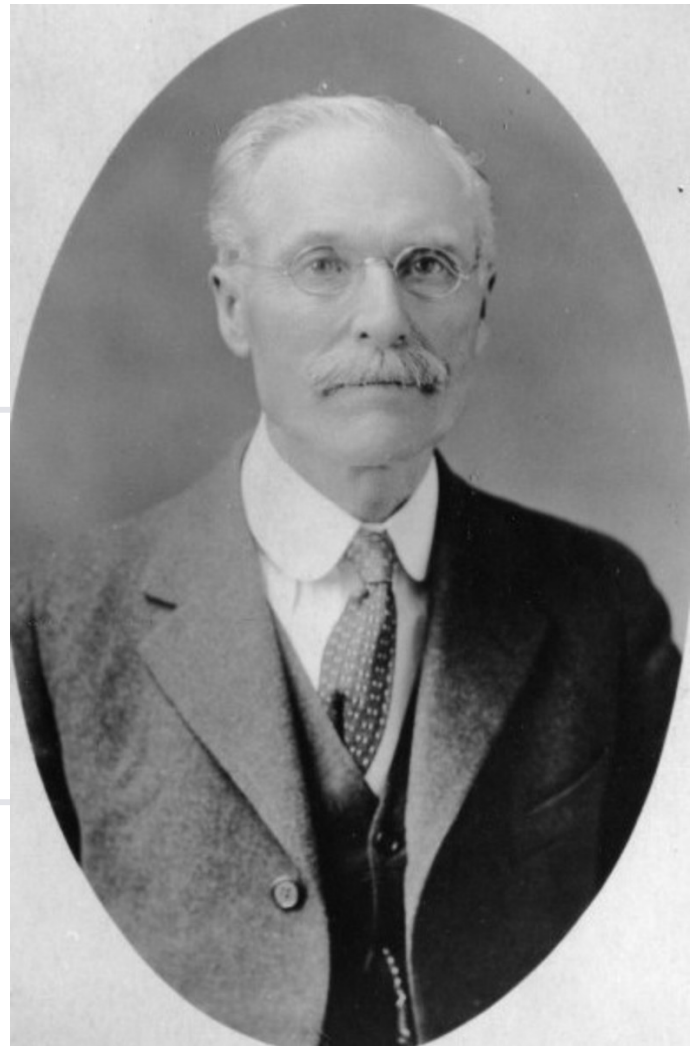
Douglas Morgan is a graduate of Union College (B.A., theology, 1978) in Lincoln, Nebraska and the University of Chicago (Ph.D., history of Christianity, 1992). He has served on the faculties of Washington Adventist University in Takoma Park, Maryland and Southern Adventist University in Collegedale, Tennessee. His publications include *Adventism and the American Republic* (University of Tennessee Press, 2001) and *Lewis C. Sheafe: Apostle to Black America* (Review and Herald, 2010). He is the ESDA assistant editor for North America.

Edwin L Stewart was a minister, conference administrator, and educator who served on the first faculty at Union College and as the fifth president of Walla Walla College.

Early Life and Conversion to Adventism

Born August 6, 1861, in the eastern Iowa community of Welton, Edwin was the youngest of four siblings in the farming family of William H. Stewart (1827-1893) and Eliza Melvina Mudge Stewart (1832-1865)! Edwin studied for ministry in the Seventh Day Baptist denomination at Alfred University, Alfred Center, New York. After completing his studies, he took a teaching position in Moscow, Idaho, where he accepted the Seventh-day Adventist message, becoming one of 17 believers in a new church organized there in 1887 following the evangelistic endeavors of James F. Scoles.²

In an “open letter” published in the *Review*, Stewart explained the reasons for his change in affiliation. While the “S.D. Adventists” and “S.D. Baptists” were alike in covenanting “to keep the commandments of God, and walk in the faith of Jesus Christ,” he cited an emphasis on Biblical prophecy, the rapid progress of “Sabbath reform” linked with the Third Angel’s Message of Revelation 14, and the restoration of the “gifts of the Spirit of God” in



Edwin L. Stewart

Photo courtesy of Center for Adventist Research.

the last days as the most significant advantages in Adventism. He also noted doctrinal clarity on “the state of the dead” and the firm stand against “the filthy and injurious practice of tobacco using” as reasons for his belief that “the S. D. Adventist Church is walking nearer to the teaching of the Bible” and “actively preparing for the coming of Christ, our blessed Redeemer.”³

Minister and Educator

Stewart turned down “positions of responsibility at secular colleges” in order to enter ministry in the Upper Columbia Conference in 1888.⁴ He married Bertha Viola Colcord (1871-1912) on August 25, 1889, in Umatilla, Oregon.⁵ They had eight children: Lottie Melvina (1890-1918), Edna Viola (1891-1925), Carl Ellsworth (1895-1977), Royal Irving (1897-1988), Celian Glen (1901-1997), Ivory Grandon (1903-1971), Vernon Lincoln (1909-1982), and Edwin Leroy (1911-2005).⁶

While ministering in Spokane, Washington, in 1890, Stewart led out in raising \$7,500 for the establishment of a new Adventist college in the Northwest. The bid to locate the school in the Spokane area fell short, though, and it was located at Walla Walla, Washington, instead.⁷ However, before Walla Walla College (now University) opened its doors in 1892, Stewart was called to serve on the faculty of another of Adventism’s new institutions of higher learning, Union College in Nebraska, when it opened in 1891. His assignment was to teach mathematics, not Bible or theology, so after five years at Union, Stewart was grateful when the Nebraska Conference gave him the opportunity to return to his ministerial calling in 1896.⁸

Stewart’s evangelistic ministry bore fruit as he built up new congregations in Central City, Kearney, and other communities.⁹ He was ordained to gospel ministry at the annual Nebraska Conference session held at College View in October 1897.¹⁰

Walla Walla College President

Just after concluding an evangelistic campaign in April 1900, Stewart stepped onto a railroad station platform in Ponca, Nebraska, just in time to overhear the station agent say, “A telegram for E. L. Stewart, and there is no such person here.” The telegram asked if he would accept the presidency of Walla Walla College. Since no one else knew where he would be that day, Stewart concluded that the telegram represented a genuine call from God and immediately telegraphed his acceptance, later informing his wife, Bertha, of his decision.¹¹

Stewart thus became the fifth president of Walla Walla College. He was one in a rapid succession of five different presidents from 1897-1905, an era in which the school continued to struggle with growing pains and conflict over the issue of whether its curriculum would emphasize the liberal arts or shorter training courses for various lines of gospel service, accompanied by industries in which students could gain practical skills and help pay for tuition with their labor.¹²

Stewart's predominant concern was to carry out the mandate of the college board to develop industries. He reported some progress in development of a broom factory and a blacksmith shop, but also faced resistance from constituents who wanted students to focus mainly on their academic work.¹³ At the end of his two years as president, he could report a steady enrollment and encouraging signs of spiritual vitality on campus, but frankly acknowledged that the "industrial department has not made the progress we had expected."¹⁴ Along with austerity measures he felt necessary given the school's heavy burden of debt, Stewart's attempts to implement the industrial program may have contributed to the perception that he was too severe. He wrote that while a large number of students previously engaged in "games of football and racing" during the afternoons were now employed in the industries, it had been necessary to place "a restraint on those who are not busy."¹⁵

Walla Walla students were participating in the campaign to relieve the general crisis of indebtedness facing Adventist schools by canvassing Ellen White's book *Christ's Object Lessons*.¹⁶ Nevertheless, the college did not see meaningful improvement in its dire financial condition during the two years of Stewart's presidency.¹⁷

Conference Administrator

In 1902 he accepted an invitation to join the ministerial ranks of the newly-organized Western Washington Conference. Then, just a few months later, he was called upon to take the responsibility of conference president.¹⁸ The conference had 850 members in 28 churches, with headquarters in Seattle. Its growth was exceptionally strong under Stewart's three years as president, reporting 1,449 members in 35 churches in 1906.¹⁹ In that same year he accepted a call to Canada, serving a year as president of the British Columbia Conference.²⁰

Then, in 1907, when the Canadian Union Conference was divided into two, Stewart was elected as the first president of the Western Canadian Union Conference. The new union, which lasted until 1932, comprised the British Columbia, Alberta, and Manitoba Conferences along with the Saskatchewan Mission (later Conference), and located its headquarters in Gladstone, Manitoba.²¹

College Professor

After two years as union president, Elder Stewart resigned prior to the 1909 session in order to move his family to the Walla Walla, Washington, area so that his children would have better access to Adventist education.²² He connected with the North Pacific Union Conference upon his return and then in 1910 joined the faculty of Walla Walla College to teach history and prophecy in the Academic Department.²³ A portion of his time in the 1909-1910 interval was devoted to preparation of textbooks. The Walla Walla College Press, in July 1910, announced publication of his 250-page *Old Testament History Lessons* and his forthcoming *Psychology or "Mind Study"* containing 60 lessons treating on "the mental faculties, the relation of mind and body, and the influence of the one upon the other."²⁴

In 1911, Professor Stewart accepted a call to teach Bible and public speaking at Emmanuel Missionary College (EMC), Berrien Springs, Michigan. He taught only a year at EMC—a year that concluded tragically with the death of his wife Bertha, at age 41, on June 22, 1912.²⁵

Final Decades as Pastor-Evangelist

His wife's death left Stewart with their eight children who ranged in age from 22 to six months. Yet this did not deter him from vigorous pursuit of his new assignment as pastor-evangelist in the West Michigan Conference. In Pentwater, for example, he conducted a series of meetings in February-March 1913 that resulted in 16 new believers signing a "covenant to keep, by the help of the Lord, all His commandments, and live up to the light given them."²⁶ His children rallied to his support, enhancing his meetings and worship services with their musical talents.²⁷

Elder Stewart married Minnie Smith Bridges on April 4, 1914, in a ceremony conducted in St. Paul, Minnesota, by O. O. Bernstein. By that time Stewart had moved to the North Dakota Conference and was engaged in pastoral-evangelistic work in Fargo. Minnesota Conference president G. W. Wells lamented the conference's loss of Minnie Bridges, a Bible worker "so well known" for involvement in evangelistic meetings conducted in the Twin Cities and whose gifts were now joined to her husband's ministry.²⁸ In 1918, Elder Stewart was, for the final time, elected to an administrative role, serving as president of the North Dakota Conference for two years.²⁹

The Stewarts, seeking a climate more favorable to Minnie's health, accepted a call to the South Texas Conference, where they ministered throughout the 1920s in the Rio Grande Valley, Austin, Palacios, Hondo, and San Antonio, among other locales.³⁰ Edwin experienced health difficulties necessitating a move to California near the end of the decade. In 1932 the couple resumed evangelistic work in Grants Pass, Oregon, where they raised up a church of 30 members.³¹ This proved to be E. L. Stewart's final major evangelistic achievement. He joined the ranks of "honorary" (retired) ministers in the North Pacific Union that same year. On July 29, 1937, a week short of his 76th birthday, Edwin Lincoln Stewart died at Grants Pass and was buried in the city's Hillcrest Memorial Park Cemetery.³²

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