

# Burton, Shirley Ann (1927–2010)

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## NATHALIE JOHANSSON

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Shirley Ann Burton was an Adventist communication professional who served the Oregon Conference, the Pacific Union Conference, and the General Conference.

## Early Life

Burton was born in Lincoln, Nebraska, on May 5, 1927, to Jack B. Burton (1905-1984), a car salesman, and Verle Marie Cowin Burton (1906-1976).<sup>1</sup> Burton's parents divorced in 1933.<sup>2</sup> Subsequently, Jack married Rose Komarek, and Verle married Theodore Grant Morris (1909-1986), a Lincoln firefighter.<sup>3</sup> Burton lived in Lincoln with Verle and Theodore Morris and her younger half-brother, Monte Maynard Morris (1936-2007).<sup>4</sup> She also had three younger half-siblings born to Jack and Rose: Jacqueline, Sue Ann, and James.<sup>5</sup>

## Education

Burton graduated from Union College with a bachelor's degree in speech and English as well as a minor in education in 1949.<sup>6</sup> While in college she was active in many extracurricular activities such as the secretary of the temperance club, vice-president of Phi Beta Epsilon, vice-president of the music guild, and associate editor of the student newspaper, *The Clocktower*.<sup>7</sup>

In 1961, Burton graduated from Southern Oregon College with a master's degree in communication.<sup>8</sup> The following year she received a fellowship which funded additional studies at the University of Oregon.<sup>9</sup>

## Early Career

Following college, Burton taught English, journalism, and speech at Oak Park Academy in Nevada, Iowa, from 1949 to 1955.<sup>10</sup> Burton became the dean of girls at Milo Academy in Oregon for one academic year (1955-1956).<sup>11</sup> This was followed by another teaching post at Laurelwood Academy in Gaston, Oregon, where she taught English, journalism, and speech from 1956 to 1963.<sup>12</sup> During these years Burton also became part of a small group of church members, recruited by J. R. Ferren, General Conference secretary for press relations, who desired to spread the Seventh-day Adventist story through mass media.<sup>13</sup>

In 1963, Burton accepted her first fulltime communication position as director of public relations for the Oregon Conference.<sup>14</sup> Subsequently, she was invited to work for the Bureau of Public Relations in the newsroom at the 1966 General Conference Session.<sup>15</sup>

On April, 17, 1969, Burton was called by the Pacific Union Conference to serve as departmental secretary for public relations and Radio-TV, the first woman to serve in this position.<sup>16</sup> She joined the Pacific Union Conference office in September 1969.<sup>17</sup> As secretary for public relations, she was also managing editor for the *Pacific Union Recorder*, which circulated to about 54,000 homes during her tenure.<sup>18</sup>

Burton was very proud of the work provided by the people who worked for the church and she was even more proud of the many members who would sacrifice part of their income for the church and its work. She had no doubt that God had called her to work for the church and thereby be part of the worldwide mission work that was being done. She wrote in the *Review and Herald* on November 21, 1974,

I was proud of the organization too, proud that this group of only a little more than 300 [church workers] could supervise, plan, and direct a worldwide church of 2.4 million members; even more proud of its dedicated members who return the tithe and give sacrificially for the support of this global enterprise. And I thanked God that He had called me to be a part of it."<sup>19</sup>

In her final editorial for the *Recorder*, she said that Adventists should be known as leaders within the field of humanitarian outreach and mission work, and that they should be known as "happy, rejoicing Christians."<sup>20</sup> Burton wanted Adventist communication to be part of the secular media in order to reach people with God's message, and she wanted Adventism to be seen as happy and positive. The world outside Adventism should get to know Adventism through the media that they were using, but in a positive way and hopefully this could lead to people asking more questions about the Adventist message and thereby convert to Adventism.

## Working for the General Conference

In 1985, Burton accepted the position of associate director for communication at the General Conference office.<sup>21</sup> Three years later she became the director of the same department, which during this time moved from Takoma Park, Maryland to Silver Spring, Maryland.<sup>22</sup> She was the second woman to hold this position, the first being Margaret Carol Hetzell.

As General Conference communication director, international travel was a significant part of Burton's job. For example, in February 1989, she traveled to the East Africa Division for four weeks where she participated in communication seminars and worked with the new communication division director Z. F. Ayonga.<sup>23</sup> Another opportunity for travel came when she was asked to visit the Inter-American Division from March 17 to April 4, 1991. She was led communication seminars and workshops in Mandeville, Jamaica, as well as the South Mexico Union, Costa Rica and Grand Cayman. The Inter-American Division communication director. In these workshops,

Burton shared advice for news writing and emphasized that good communicators followed Christ's example of mingling with people.<sup>24</sup>

Burton managed the news desk for General Conference session in Indianapolis, Indiana, held July 5-14, 1990. One of the challenges she faced was negative publicity by the Catholic religion editor for the *Indianapolis Star* after local Adventist church membership distributed "shabby" copies of *The Great Controversy* across the city. Burton handled this and other situations "in a truly professional yet empathetic way."<sup>25</sup>

One of the most critical public relations events Burton was called upon to address was the siege by United States law enforcement officers of the Branch Davidian compound near Waco, Texas, between February 28 and April 19, 1993. The Branch Davidians' origin as a splinter group from the Seventh-day Adventist Church caught the media's attention. Thus, Burton received numerous inquiries from American media outlets. She did "a credible job of handling the various ramifications" according to Herbert Ford, then public relations director for the Pacific Union Conference. Suddenly, though, without consulting or notifying Burton, the General Conference leadership hired a commercial PR firm to handle all matters related to Waco.<sup>26</sup> Despite being undermined in this way, Burton continued to serve the denomination faithfully until her retirement in 1994.<sup>27</sup>

During Burton's tenure at the General Conference, the movement to increase women's involvement in leadership intensified. This led to invitations for Burton to serve on many committees including those addressing the church manual, the council on interchurch relations, General Conference session planning and program, and protocol.<sup>28</sup> She also served on the board of Adventist World Radio<sup>29</sup> and the Women's Ministries advisory.<sup>30</sup>

## Retirement and Death

In retirement Burton continued working within the field of communication. She volunteered for the Adventist-Laymen's Services and Industries (ASI) and worked as a consultant for Christian Record Services as well as volunteering many hours for her alma mater, Union College.<sup>31</sup>

Shirley Burton passed away on August 16, 2010, at the Bryan LGH Medical Center in Lincoln, Nebraska, at the age of 83. She died of complications following a stroke that she had suffered in her home the previous Friday.<sup>32</sup>

## Legacy

Shirley Burton was widely regarded as an excellent news writer who saw communication as a way to conduct mission work. As a teacher and also through her positions within the Adventist denomination, she inspired generations of future communicators and media people in the church. She also left a legacy of hard work, a firm belief in the mission work of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and an example of how women can achieve career goals when given opportunities.

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