

Warner, Bertha E. (1901–1981)

GODFREY K. SANG

Godfrey K. Sang is a historical researcher and writer with an interest in Adventist history. He holds a B.A. in History from the University of Eastern Africa Baraton and a number of qualifications from other universities. He is a published author. He is the co-author of the book *On the Wings of a Sparrow: How the Seventh-day Adventist Church Came to Western Kenya*.

Bertha E. Warner (née Milne) was a pioneer missionary teacher to Kenya. She moved to Nyanchwa, Kenya in January 1925 to establish the educational program for girls' education.

Early Life

Bertha was born on July 22, 1901, in Cupar-Fife, Scotland.¹ She joined the Stanborough Park Missionary College graduating in 1917. She became a teacher at Southend-on-sea 42 miles east of London before moving to teach at the Stanborough Park Academy in Watford. It was from here that she got her calling to move to Africa to pioneer girls' education at Nyanchwa. Eric A Beavon and his wife Myrna had been in Nyanchwa since 1920. They made the plea that a school for girls was badly needed. The British Union Conference (BUC) mobilized £250 from donations to establish this school.²

The BUC also identified a female teacher, and that was Bertha E. Milne. In anticipation of her arrival, Beavon constructed a grass-thatched mud and wattle house for her and sent the photo of it back to England promising that a better one would be constructed once the funds were available.³

Moving to Nyanchwa

Bertha arrived in Nyanchwa and encountered a massive culture shock. Her experiences within the first six weeks are known to us in a letter she wrote for *The Missionary Worker* published in April 1925. Her first duty was learning the language, which, like all the rest, she struggled initially. "You can imagine the difficulty there is in learning a language that the people themselves cannot read or write," she wrote.⁴ Despite the odds, the girls were admitted to the newly constructed school. The girls were provided with a sleeping mat, blankets, and cooking utensils. Bertha created a duty rota where one of the girls was appointed to cook for the week and another would ensure that there was sufficient firewood and water.

The day at the school began at the ringing of the bell at six in the morning. The girls had 30 minutes to prepare, and worship began at 6:30 a.m. Breakfast followed at 7:00 a.m. Breakfast was made up of *obokima* and beans. She wrote, "*Obokima* is made with a native grain (millet) and water. The grain is stirred into boiling water until

the person stirring it cannot possibly make the stick move in it anymore.”⁵ It was January when Bertha arrived and being a dry month, the farms were being prepared in anticipation of the planting season when the long rains came (usually March to July). The girls then went to till the mission land in the morning, and in the afternoon lessons were held in reading and writing. After the evening meal, the girls went in for worship and thereafter a program of music or games. They then went to bed, three rolled up on one blanket on the mat sleeping on the floor.

New girls arrived at the mission wearing skin dresses, beads, and ornaments. Some came in voluntarily; others ran away from home joining without the consent of their parents. The mission made them work for a probationary period of one week after which the new girl was thereafter given cloth—basically a wrap-around sheet around the shoulders. They were then admitted to join the rest in the normal program. Three weeks later they were given a dress.

Marrying Off the Girls

Bertha had been there only a few weeks when five young men approached her saying they had raised enough cattle to pay the dowry for the girls. She was taken aback by the request coming from a society where such was not practiced. She wrote, “If we do not let the girls go, the boys will be tempted to marry heathen (girls); so, the only thing is to part with them and hope that the little training they have had will make them at least good wives.”⁶ Mission educated girls were sought after by the mission-educated young men, and the reasoning was that the young men would easily fall back into the ancient ways if they did not get Christian girls to marry. In fact, the whole essence of the girls’ program was to contemporize them sufficiently to make good spouses to build Christian homes. This was particularly critical when it came to those joining ministry and those becoming teachers in the church schools. The women were deemed to be an important part of the evangelism program.

Later Life

Bertha did not remain in Nyanchwa for long, as she left early in 1927. Her place was taken up by Ruth D. Raitt. She returned to England and married Walter Warner and together had five children: daughters Davina, Christina, and Virginia; and sons David and Arthur.⁷ They moved to Canada settling in British Columbia where she did colporteur work. She also taught at the Okanagan Adventist Academy for 19 years. She died on July 6, 1981, at Kamloops, British Columbia, Canada. She was survived by her husband, five children, and 12 grandchildren.

SOURCES

Harker, J. “Missionary Volunteer Offerings.” *Missionary Worker*, January 23, 1925.

Milne, Bertha E. "My First Six Weeks in Africa." *Missionary Worker*, April 3, 1925.

"Warner, Bertha," obituary. *ARH*, September 10, 1981.

NOTES

1. "Warner, Bertha," obituary, *ARH*, September 10, 1981, 23.
2. J. Harker, "Missionary Volunteer Offerings," *Missionary Worker*, January 23, 1925, 2.
3. Ibid.
4. Bertha E. Milne, "My First Six Weeks in Africa," *Missionary Worker*, April 3, 1925, 1.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. "Warner, Bertha," obituary.

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