

Fenner, Harry Emil

(1862–1940)

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Harry Emil Fenner co-founded with [Luther Warren](#) (1864-1940) the first Adventist youth club.

Early Life

Harry Emil Fenner was born June 1, 1862, in Oakland, Michigan, to Hiram Alden (1839-1916) and Charlotte Rathburn (b. 1832) Fenner.¹ Hiram accepted the Sabbatarian Adventist message in 1850 and was an active local church leader who held meetings for area believers in their home.² On one memorable occasion, Hiram picked up Joseph Bates, who came to visit their church.³ In 1885 Hiram also received credentials from the General Conference.⁴ Hiram and Charlotte married in the 1850s. Harry was the third of their thirteen children.⁵

Foundation of an Adventist Youth Club

At age sixteen, Harry Fenner with Luther Warren organized the first young people's society in Hazelton, Michigan.⁶ According to a later account, in 1879, while walking on a country road, Warren and Fenner talked and prayed about forming a boys' society. Warren recalled how, "Some days later a few boys gathered for our first meeting in the unfurnished upstairs room of our new log house, where the initial steps were taken in the carrying out of our plans."⁷ The boys present elected officers: a president and secretary-treasurer.⁸ They opened



Harry Fenner (left) and Luther Warren, youth ministry pioneers.

Credit: *Youth's Instructor*, September 10, 1929.

with prayer and a song, worked on a temperance pledge, and collected funds to buy religious material. He later remembered how “none of us were singers, but we tried to make a ‘joyful noise.’” He recalled singing the hymn “O Tell Me of Heaven, Sweet Heaven.”⁹ A short time later they invited girls to join them in their work.¹⁰ They gave away religious tracts and “did all kinds of Christian-help work.”¹¹

Later Life

In 1919 he married a widow, Calista H. Glann Hamilton (1863-1942).¹² According to U.S. Census Records, Harry spent his life as a farmhand working for various relatives, carpenter, and farmer. Not much else is known about his personal life. Fenner died September 29, 1940, in Oakland, Michigan. He had been an active member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Oxford, Michigan.¹³

At the 1939 Michigan [Camp Meeting](#), church leaders celebrated the 60th anniversary of the birth of the denomination’s youth ministry. [Alfred W. Peterson](#), the head of the denomination’s youth department at the General Conference, reported that there were 6,417 Adventist youth missionary volunteer societies worldwide at that time with a total membership of 136,480. Between the official organization of youth ministries in 1907 and 1939, these societies had donated \$4,996,429 toward missionary enterprises and distributed 101,068,380 pieces of gospel literature.¹⁴ In October 1947, a monument was erected at the Hazelton Church in Juddville, Michigan, to mark the spot where these two youth inaugurated the beginnings of Adventist youth work.¹⁵ Warren and Fenner are memorialized in Elfred Lee’s 1981 mural of Adventist history, *Christ of the Narrow Way*. The records of the Hazelton Seventh-day Adventist Church are at the Center for Adventist Research at Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, U.S.A.¹⁶

SOURCES

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NOTES

1. For genealogical details, see the genealogical tree created at: https://www.ancestry.com/invite-ui/accept?token=X8Xjk5cl99aa9JFA26ZQLWgyiiqhdKSSdVb6qb7_P5o=.
2. R. J. Lawrence, "Note from Bro. Lawrence," *ARH*, January 7, 1862, 46.
3. Joseph Bates, "Meetings in the Eastern District, Mich.," *ARH*, July 9, 1867, 57.
4. See report in *ARH*, November 17, 1885, 717.
5. His father had nine children by his first wife, Charlotte and an additional six children by his second wife, Etta M. Ogden (1856-1940).
6. Obit. *ARH*, December 12, 1940, 22.
7. Luther Warren, "Historical Glimpses of Our Young People's Work," *The Youth's Instructor*, April 24, 1917, 4.
8. Carrie Tichenor and Luther Warren have slightly different accounts of how many boys were present at the first meeting. Warren places eight boys at the first meeting. Tichenor states that seven charter members were at the meeting: Luther Warren, Harry and Isaiah Fenner, Charlie and James Burgess, George Harle, and Eddie Van Horn with Dell Rathburn joining the group later. Rathburn was the first president. See Carrie E. Tichenor, "A Fiftieth Anniversary," *The Youth's Instructor*, September 10, 1929, 6, 13; Luther Warren, "Our First Young People's Society," *The Church Officers' Gazette*, November 1929, 11-12.
9. Luther Warren, "Our First Young People's Society," *The Church Officers' Gazette*, November 1929, 11-12.
10. Luther Warren, "Historical Glimpses of Our Young People's Work," *The Youth's Instructor*, April 24, 1917, 4.
11. C. M. Bunker, "The First M.V. Society," *Lake Union Herald*, May 4, 1921, 11.
12. See Obit. *Mayville Monitor*, May 14, 1942. Accessed from Ancestry.com.
13. <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/201402087/harry-fenner>; Obit., *ARH*, December 12, 1940, 22.
14. "Adventist Youth Marks Birthday," *Battle Creek Enquirer*, August 25, 1939, 2.
15. "We Have Nothing to Fear for the Future," *Lake Union Herald*, October 3, 1961, 9; E. W. Dunbar, "A Rallying Center for Michigan Youth," *ARH*, December 18, 1947, 18.

16. *Hazelton Adventist Church Record Book, 1886-1904* (published in Hazelton, Michigan, U.S.A.), kept at the Center for Adventist Research, Berrien Springs, Michigan; a pdf accessed via the Adventist Digital Library, see [here](#).

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