

Steen, Thomas Wilson (1887-1978)

THE BRAZILIAN WHITE CENTER – UNASP

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Thomas Wilson Steen

Photo courtesy of UNASP São Paulo Memory Center.

Thomas Wilson Steen was an educator, administrator, minister, and psychologist.

Early Life, Early Education, and Marriage

Thomas Wilson Steen was born on April 12, 1887, in Washington County, Iowa, United States of America. He was the son of Samuel Britton Steen and Emma Cooper Steen,¹ who gave him a religious upbringing.² His parents learned of Adventism through his maternal grandmother, Mary Jane Cooper (1833-1919), who had joined the Seventh-day Adventist Church in 1858.³

Thomas completed his elementary studies at Stuart Academy in Iowa, USA. He began working for the SDA Church before he obtained his college degree, teaching from 1906-1907 at a newly established church school in Iron River, Michigan, USA.⁴ In 1910, he graduated from Emmanuel Missionary College (now Andrews University). That same year, he married Margaret Mallory, who graduated one year earlier from the same college and remained as a piano and Latin teacher.⁵ Thomas and Margaret had two girls, Rebekah⁶ and Ramira.⁷ Margaret worked alongside her husband in the educational field⁸ as a language and music teacher at Fox River Academy from 1910-1912⁹ and at Adelpian Academy until 1918, when she moved with her husband to Brazil,¹⁰ taught piano and organ, and directed the music department at Brazil College (now UNASP-SP).¹¹

Academy Director and College Administrator

Thomas Steen served as dean, treasurer, and teacher at Fox River Academy from 1910-1912,¹² where he taught English, science,¹³ and history.¹⁴ He then served as director of Adelpian Academy in Michigan, USA, from 1913-1918.¹⁵ In both places, he dedicated his efforts to the structural and physical growth of the institutions.¹⁶ In 1918, his ministry changed as he accepted to go beyond his homeland and become the director of the newly-founded Adventist Seminary in São Paulo, Brazil (now UNASP-SP).¹⁷ Steen was the second to occupy that position, replacing the pioneer, John Lipke.¹⁸

In 1919, under Steen's administration, the theology program was reorganized. Up to that year, the program could not be recognized as a college degree because of the general nature of the curriculum's courses. As part of the restructuring of the curriculum, the theology degree launched as an official college degree, resulting in the Seminary's first graduation in 1922.¹⁹ At the same time, the college experienced an expansion and the construction of several new installations, such as the director's house, houses for workers, a new wing in the girl's dormitory,²⁰ a laundry room, a bakery, a dairy farm,²¹ a woodworking shop, a dining room, and a kitchen.²² Additionally, Steen officiated the first Adventist Seminary Church baptism on December 27, 1919, with Pastor John Boehm.²³

Ordination to the Ministry and Establishment of the James White Library

The time in which Steen was a director became essential to his future career. Having demonstrated his multiple managerial skills, he was entrusted with the management of two additional schools in the USA and three in South America.²⁴ In 1928, the family returned to the USA. Steen directed Broadview College in Illinois, USA, from 1928-1934²⁵ and received his ordination to the ministry in January 1929.²⁶

In addition, Steen completed his master's degree at Northwestern University²⁷ with a dissertation titled, "Commercial Industries in Private Schools and Colleges."²⁸ Steen was the director of the Emmanuel Missionary

College from 1934-1937.²⁹ One of his main administrative achievements at the college was the building of the James White Library in 1936 as part of the institutional development plan.³⁰

Higher Education, College President, and Psychologist

In 1939, he finished his doctorate degree at the University of Chicago³¹ with a thesis titled, "The Vocational Choices of Students Whose Religious Beliefs Limit Their Occupational Opportunities."³² He also enrolled in post-doctorate studies at the following institutions: Western Reserve University, Duke University, University of Tennessee, George Peabody College for Teachers, and Claremont Graduate School. Steen also majored in psychology and school administration at Northwestern University and the University of Chicago. From 1939 on, he devoted a considerable amount of time to counseling and mental assessments.³³

From 1939-1940, he worked as president of Washington Missionary College in Maryland, USA.³⁴ He was then invited to serve in South America again, this time as president of River Plate College, Argentina, from 1940-1944. He also served as the director of Uruguay Adventist Academy from 1944-1945 and of Inca Union College in 1945, during which he taught several courses.³⁵ In 1946, he returned to the USA to serve as president of Madison College in Tennessee until 1948. From then until 1955, he directed the departments of education and psychology at Southern Missionary College, Tennessee.

Steen devoted more time near the end of his career to the practice of psychology. In 1955, he joined Dr. Henry Adren, a psychiatrist at Washington D.C. Sanitarium, and worked as a clinical psychologist from 1955-1956. The following year, he transferred to Miller Medical Clinic in Pomona, California, while running his psychologist's office near his home in Loma Linda, California.³⁶

Retirement and Contribution

In 1967, Dr. Thomas Wilson Steen retired due to eyesight failure.³⁷ Steen and his wife moved to Loma Linda, where they lived until 1974. He then spent the last four years of his life in Berrien Springs, Michigan, where he lived with his daughter, Rebekah.³⁸

Thomas Wilson Steen died at age 91 on November 29, 1978, in Pawating Hospital in Niles, Michigan, U.S.A., and was buried in Rose Hill Cemetery.³⁹ In over 50 years of service to the Seventh-day Adventist Church, he significantly contributed to the field of education by teaching at and directing important Adventist educational institutions in South America and the United States of America.

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