

Varney, Frank Curtis (1893–1957) and Esther Marie (Pearce) (1894–1980)



R. WILLIAM CASH

R. William Cash, Ph.D. is a retired educator who spent much of his career as an institutional researcher in several colleges and universities. Born to missionary parents in South America and a fifth-generation Adventist, he has had a long-time interest in denominational history. He served from 1995 to 1998 as director of Archives and Statistics at the General Conference.

Curtis and Esther Varney, missionaries for 14 years in South America, served the church in financial administration and other office capacities, and then engaged in an evangelism-oriented medical practice after returning to the United States.¹

Curtis and Esther Varney, wedding photo, 1917.

Photo courtesy of the private collection of Ann Pearce Cash.

Early Years

Frank Curtis Varney (usually cited in denominational sources as F. C. Varney or F. Curtis Varney) was born in Atlanta, Georgia to Mary Louise (Durham) and William Penn Varney on January 8, 1893, the youngest of three sons.² Esther Marie Pearce was born in Bay City, Michigan to Fannie (Nelson) and Alfred Eugene Pearce on January 12, 1894, the second of four children.³ Both were born into Seventh-day Adventist homes and had begun their careers when their paths crossed.

Curtis's father passed away when he was six.⁴ During his boyhood he attended both public and Adventist elementary schools in Atlanta and Nashville. In 1907, at the age of 14, he began work as an apprentice in the bindery of the Southern Publishing Association in Nashville. Over the next six years, he was promoted to office

boy, bill-clerk, cost accountant, assistant bookkeeper, and shipping clerk. He was baptized by C. F. McVagh in 1910. In 1913, he became secretary and treasurer of the Tennessee River Conference and Tract Society in Nashville, a position he held for two years. Seeking further education, Curtis took a job as bookkeeper at the Southern Training Institute in Graysville, Tennessee and canvassed during the summer while attending classes for two years.⁵ He was still residing in Graysville when the General Conference asked him, in 1916, to become the secretary and treasurer of the Inca Union Mission in Lima, Peru.⁶

Esther's childhood was spent in Bay City,⁷ where she attended both Adventist and public elementary schools. Her mother died in 1908, just before she finished the eighth grade. Esther was baptized in 1909 in Bay City by A. R. Sandborn. After one year at Cedar Lake Academy, she joined her brother Paul at Emmanuel Missionary College in Berrien Springs, Michigan,⁸ and completed three years of clerical and bookkeeping courses. In 1915, after working for her father and others back home in Bay City, she worked briefly for Professor J. G. Lamson at Cedar Lake Academy, also in Michigan. Then, in September 1915 she was invited to join the secretarial pool at the General Conference in Washington, D.C. "The secretaries in the General Conference office . . . were not assigned to any department permanently," she recalled. "We worked in a big room all together."⁹ Esther assisted Flora Plummer, head of the Sabbath School Department, Principal C. C. Lewis of the Fireside Correspondence School, and W. L. Burgan, who was in charge of the Press Bureau. While working at the GC she met Curtis Varney, who was finalizing preparations before heading overseas.

Mission Service

Curtis departed New York on September 23, 1916, passing through the two-year-old Panama Canal on his way to Peru.¹⁰ Esther followed a year later, initially living with other girls in Miraflores, a suburb of Lima, where the union headquarters were located. She and Curtis were married at the Municipal Hall, Callao, on November 14, 1917. Esther found employment at the U.S. Ambassador's house in Lima. The Varneys had no children.¹¹

As secretary/treasurer of the Inca Union Mission (consisting of Peru, Ecuador, and Bolivia) from 1916 to 1921, Curtis managed the finances of the union, sent regular reports of the mission work to the South American Division and the General Conference, and traveled to the mission offices within the union to audit their financial records. In addition to these responsibilities, he was also the union Sabbath School secretary (and one year, the Home Missionary secretary), and the manager of "Casa Adventista," the union book depository. Curtis also served as the secretary/treasurer of the Peruvian Mission based in Lima from 1916 to 1920.¹²

Esther's youngest sister Frances died suddenly of a staph infection on September 10, 1920, and Esther returned to be with her father and to have surgery at the Washington Sanitarium. Curtis joined her briefly and when she recovered he returned by himself to Peru. Esther remained to help her father and stepmother in Michigan until after the birth of her half-brother, Donald Eugene, in mid-1921, before she returned to Peru.¹³

In 1921 the South American Division recommended that Curtis take the position of treasurer of the East Brazil Union Mission, just organized in 1920.¹⁴ After a furlough, the Varneys arrived November 6, 1922, in Rio de Janeiro, locale of the union headquarters.¹⁵ Finding housing in Rio was a challenge, both for their living quarters as well as for the office. The union had to relocate its headquarters from the first building they secured when their landlords, who were Franciscan monks, told them they could not “receive rent from a Protestant Missionary Organization,” Curtis reported. He added, “when you are in these strong Catholic countries you may expect such things.”¹⁶ As in Peru, Curtis was not only the secretary/treasurer of the union, but also served as secretary/treasurer of one of the missions within the union, the Rio de Janeiro Mission, for a year. A year later, he was listed as the secretary/treasurer of the Bahia Mission, working with mission superintendent Leo B. Halliwell.¹⁷

In 1926, Curtis was asked to join the South American Division in Buenos Aires, Argentina, as the cashier and transportation agent for the division and to assist in the auditing.¹⁸ In January 1929, the division paper, the *South American Bulletin*, announced that the Varneys had moved to the Florida suburb of Buenos Aires, locale of the Austral Union Conference headquarters, where Curtis had been appointed to serve as secretary/treasurer.¹⁹ A few months later, in April 1929, they returned to the United States on furlough, and then requested permanent return. Both were employed at Loma Linda Sanitarium—Curtis as an accountant in the credit office, then head accountant, and Esther as a stenographer in the manager’s office.²⁰

Later Years

While employed at the Sanitarium, Curtis completed his college-level premedical courses at San Bernardino Valley Junior College.²¹ In 1933 he enrolled in the medical program at the College of Medical Evangelists in Loma Linda and completed two years of study.²² Curtis later completed an Osteopathy course,²³ and by 1940 had set up practice as an osteopathic physician and surgeon in Hermosa Beach, California.²⁴

In 1950, Curtis joined an osteopathic physician group in Sacramento. In 1954, the members of the group jointly authored an article published in *Ministry* magazine explaining how each sought to bring “the light of truth to the mind, and the peace of understanding to the heart of his patient through the study of God’s Word.” This they regarded as “a clearly understood purpose and a willingly accepted responsibility” and reported that, as a result, “many people receive an attractive acquaintance with Seventh-day Adventism,” frequently leading to “conversion and baptism.” Through such endeavors many patients “are blessed in body and in soul, and return to their homes with a better understanding of how to live and with nobler ideals in their living,” they wrote.²⁵

Curtis died in Sacramento at the age of 64 on December 26, 1957.²⁶ Esther moved to Loma Linda, where she passed away at the age of 86 on July 10, 1980.²⁷ They are both buried at the Montecito Memorial Park in Colton, California.²⁸

Contribution

During the post-World War I expansion of Adventist overseas mission work, the Varneys were among an increasing number of missionaries who undertook administrative positions to nurture development of the denomination's organizational structure worldwide. While Esther filled a variety of roles, including office employment both within and outside of denominational work, Curtis demonstrated that a capable young man of limited education could, with drive and dedication, show that he could be entrusted with ever-increasing responsibilities for the organization. He then went on, in the final phase of his career, to use his profession to witness for his Redeemer.

SOURCES

"A Letter from Brother F. Curtis Varney." *Field Tidings*, December 20, 1922.

"Austral Union Notes." *South American Bulletin*, June 1929.

Bull, Malcolm and Lockhart, Keith. *Seeking a Sanctuary: Seventh-day Adventism and the American Dream* San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers. 1989.

Bulletin of the College of Medical Evangelists Announcement of the School of Medicine 1934-1935 and 1935-1936. Loma Linda and Los Angeles, CA: College of Medical Evangelists.

"Class Begins Medical Work at Loma Linda." *San Bernadino Daily Sun*, August 20, 1933.

College of Medical Evangelists Board Minutes. Archives and Special Collections, Loma Linda University Libraries.

Community Medical Center Staff (William K. Eaton, D.O., F. Curtis Varney, D.O., Russell T. Brown, D.O., Robert A. Jacobsen, D.O., E. L. Mathisen, D.D.S, and G. H. Smith, Chaplain). "Awakening and Caring for Interests." *Ministry*, July 1954.

"Curtis Varney obituary." *ARH*, March 27, 1958.

Dessain, W. A. "Durham, Mary Louise obituary." *Southern Tidings*, October 9, 1940.

"Division Notes." *South American Bulletin*, February 1928.

"Division Notes." *South American Bulletin*, January 1929.

"Divisional Notes." *South American Bulletin*, August 1927.

"Dr Frank Curtis Varney." *Find a Grave*. Memorial ID 59391606, September 29, 2010. Accessed March 9, 2022. <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/59391606/frank-curtis-varney>.

"Farewell Visit." *Field Tidings*, September 6, 1916.

General Conference Committee, General Conference Archives.

"Notes." *South American Bulletin*, March 1926.

Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia. 2nd rev. edition. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1996. S.v. "Union Adventist Educational Complex."

Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook. General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Online Archives (GCA).
<https://documents.adventistarchives.org/Yearbooks/Forms/AllItems.aspx>

Varney, F.C. "'Big Week' in Brazil." *Southern Union Worker*, May 17, 1923.

Varney, Esther Pearce. Recollections as told to Donald E. Pearce. January 1, 1978. Transcription in personal collection of Ann Pearce Cash.

"Varney, Esther P. obituary." *ARH*, September 11, 1980.

Varney, Frank Curtis and Esther Marie Pearce. Secretariat Missionary Appointee Files, RG 21, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Archives, Silver Spring, Maryland, U.S.A.

NOTES

1. The writer is married to Esther Pearce Varney's niece and is grateful that she has shared family heritage materials for this article. Appreciation needs to be expressed to Michael Olivarez and Chelsi Cannon at the Department of Archives and Special Collections of the University Libraries at Loma Linda University for their assistance in locating documents regarding the Varneys while they were working at the Loma Linda Sanitarium and studying at the College of Medical Evangelists.
2. Frank Curtis Varney, Biographical Information Blank, July 16, 1916, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Archives, Silver Spring, MD, Secretariat Missionary Files, RG 21, Record 114950; "Dr Frank Curtis Varney," *Find a Grave*, Memorial ID 59391606, September 29, 2010, accessed March 9, 2022, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/59391606/frank-curtis-varney>.
3. F.C. Varney Biographical Information Blank, July 16, 1916, GCA; Esther Marie Pearce, Biographical Information Blank, September 30, 1917, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Archives, Silver Spring, MD, Secretariat Missionary Files, RG 21, Record 114950.
4. W.A. Dessain, "Mary Louise Durham obituary," *Southern Tidings*, October 9, 1940, 7, states that her husband, W.P. Varney, "preceded her in death by 42 years."
5. F.C. Varney Biographical Information Blank, July 16, 1916, GCA.
6. General Conference Committee, March 20, 1916, 399; June 2, 1916, 435; and July 11, 1916, 438; General Conference Archives.
7. Esther Pearce Varney, Recollections as told to Donald E. Pearce, January 1, 1978, transcription in personal collection of Ann Pearce Cash; "Dr Frank Curtis Varney," *Find a Grave*.

8. In their book *Seeking a Sanctuary*, Malcolm Bull and Keith Lockhart relate the experience of John Ragland, an African American Adventist, who told of having “a running love affair” with “Ester” Pearce while attending Emmanuel Missionary College (EMC) despite “opposition from school officials and Ester’s (sic) brother.” According to Ragland the relationship came to an end after the school’s president told him that “he could not marry a white woman.” Mention of this incident appears in the first edition of *Seeking A Sanctuary: Seventh-day Adventism and the American Dream* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 198-199; reprinted in *Telling the Story: An Anthology on the Development of Black SDA Work* (Black Caucus of SDA Administrators, 1996), 1/66-1/67, General Conference Online Archives, Books, <https://documents.adventistarchives.org/Books/TTS1996.pdf>. Briefer mention of Ragland’s experience is included in the second edition of *Seeking A Sanctuary* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006), 285. The evidence shows that John Ragland and Esther Pearce attended EMC together during 1910-1911, but not 1908-1909. Esther Pearce’s GC Biographical Information Blank indicates her attendance at Cedar Lake Academy in 1908-1909 and EMC in 1909-1912. Reports in the “Items of Interest—Emmanuel Missionary College” section of the *Lake Union Herald* (March 24, 1909, 7; August 4, 1909, 7; November 10, 1909, 7; February 9, 1910, 7; November 30, 1910, 6) show that Ragland left EMC in March 1909 for a temporary school teaching assignment in the South, canvassed in Illinois during the summer, and returned to EMC as a student by the end of January 1910, and that he along with Esther and Paul Pearce were students at EMC during the 1910-1911 school year. The disparity in age between John and Esther should also be noted: She would have just turned 16 when their overlapping time at EMC began while John, born October 5, 1884, would have been 25; see “John M. Ragland obituary,” *Lake Union Herald*, September 14, 1982, 11.
9. Esther Pearce Varney, Recollections.
10. “Farewell Visit,” *Field Tidings*, September 6, 1916, 2.
11. Esther Pearce Varney, Recollections; “Dr Frank Curtis Varney,” *Find a Grave*.
12. “Inca Union Mission” and “Peruvian Mission” entries in *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* for 1917-1921, GCA.
13. Esther Pearce Varney, Recollections.
14. General Conference Committee, June 6, 1921, 1099. General Conference Archives.
15. “A Letter from Brother F. Curtis Varney,” *Field Tidings*, December 20, 1922, 6. This letter was addressed to his mother, who shared it with *Field Tidings* and the *Southern Union Worker* (January 11, 1923, 2-3). It also contains a lengthy delightful description of their visit to Barbados on the steamship “Vauban” while enroute to Rio.
16. F.C. Varney, “Big Week’ in Brazil,” *Southern Union Worker*, May 17, 1923, 3.
17. “East Brazil Union Mission” in *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* for 1923-1925; “Rio de Janeiro Mission,” *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* for 1924; “Bahia Mission,” in *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* for 1925, GCA.

18. "Notes," *South American Bulletin*, March 1926, 8; "South American Division," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* for 1927, GCA; "Divisional Notes," *South American Bulletin*, August 1927, 8; "Division Notes," *South American Bulletin*, February 1928, 8.
19. "Division Notes," *South American Bulletin*, January 1929, 7-8.
20. "Austral Union Notes," *South American Bulletin*, June 1929, 5; Frank Curtis Varney in "New York, New York Passenger and Crew Lists, 1909, 1925-1957," *FamilySearch*, accessed July 13, 2022, <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:2:997D-7GSQ>.
21. College of Medical Evangelists Board Minutes, September 4, 1930, 2, Archives and Special Collections, Loma Linda University Libraries; "Class Begins Medical Work at Loma Linda," *San Bernardino Daily Sun*, August 20, 1933, 12, clipping in Archives and Special Collections, Loma Linda University Libraries.
22. *Bulletin of the College of Medical Evangelists Announcement of the School of Medicine* 1934-1935, 98 and 1935-1936, 97, Archives and Special Collections, Loma Linda University Libraries.
23. Esther Pearce Varney, Recollections. The California College of Osteopathic Physicians and Surgeons in Los Angeles, later incorporated into the School of Medicine at the University of California, Irvine, appears to have been the only osteopathic school in southern California at that time but no verification that Frank Curtis Varney graduated at this institution has been discovered.
24. Esther Pearce Varney, Recollections; "Dr Frank Curtis Varney," *Find a Grave Memorial*.
25. Esther Pearce Varney, Recollections; Community Medical Center Staff (William K. Eaton, D.O., F. Curtis Varney, D.O., Russell T. Brown, D.O., Robert A. Jacobsen, D.O., E. L. Mathisen, D.D.S, and G. H. Smith, Chaplain). "Awakening and Caring for Interests." *The Ministry*, July 1954, 21-2.
26. "Curtis Varney obituary," *ARH*, March 27, 1958.
27. Esther Pearce Varney, Recollections; "Esther P. Varney obituary," *ARH*, September 11, 1980.
28. Author's personal knowledge from, with his wife, locating and photographing these gravesites.

encyclopedia.adventist.org is an official website of the [Seventh-day Adventist World Church](#)

© 2020 General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 12501 Old Columbia Pike Silver Spring , MD 20904 USA 301-680-6000