Peck, Sarah Elizabeth (1868–1968)

JIM WIBBERDING

Jim Wibberding, D.Min. (Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan) served as a pastor in the Pennsylvania, Idaho, and Oregon Conferences for seventeen years. He currently resides in Angwin, California, where he is professor of Applied Theology and Biblical Studies, as well as chair of the Theology Department, at Pacific Union College. Jim has also worked as a dissertation advisor and adjunct professor for the D.Min. Program at Andrews University for more than a decade.



Sarah E. Peck, 1880s.

Photo courtesy of Center for Adventist Research.

Sarah Peck was an educational pioneer and curriculum author, and a literary assistant to Ellen G. White.

Early Life

Sarah was born in Menomonie, Wisconsin, on April 5, 1868, to Adventist parents William E. Peck (1829-1898) and Mary J. Peck (1833-1913).[1] She was the fifth of seven children.[2] At age 18, while a teacher in the public school system, she sensed God calling her to make the Adventist mission her own.[3] Unlike many of her friends, she focused her attention on professional pursuits instead of romance, and never married or had children.

In 1886, Sarah enrolled at Battle Creek College, graduating from the English course in 1888.[4] This training prepared her well for a long and influential career as an educator, author, and editor. It also provided her with a more intimate understanding of Seventh-day Adventist beliefs, equipping her to write on theological topics in books such as *God's Great Plan* (Pacific Press, 1922), explaining the doctrine of salvation for eighth graders, and *The Path to the Throne of God: The Gospel According to Moses* (Pacific Press, 1968), explicating the significance of the sanctuary for general readers.

Pioneering Ministry

As she prepared to graduate college, others saw in Sarah the heart of a pioneer, expressed in her precise and forceful personality. They chose her along with Elsie Westphal, and Charles Lewis to start the denomination's fourth high school in November 1888. Begun with 60 students in a church basement in Minneapolis, the Minnesota Conference School developed into Maplewood Academy (renamed 1904).[5]

While Sarah Peck and her partners were busy starting a high school in Minnesota, Seventh-day Adventists in South Africa dreamed of a college. In 1892, the call came for Sarah to help found Claremont Union College near Cape Town.[6] She spent four years establishing the college, building up publishing, teaching classes, starting an elementary school near Kimberley,[7] among other activities. In South Africa, she also began to voice a clear philosophy of education that would grow through the years ahead.[8] Today, Helderberg College stands as a monument to the quality work that she and others devoted to the early development of Adventist education in South Africa.

Literary Assistant to Ellen White

In Australia, Ellen White recognized Sarah Peck's marked abilities and asked three times for her to help build what is now Avondale University.[9] Peck's supervisors deflected Ellen White's early attempts, because they still needed her in South Africa. Mrs. White's third letter got through to Sarah at a moment when she needed a change.[10] In 1898, she joined the work in Australia.[11] For the next four years, Sarah taught classes at the college, helped organize the school, edited materials for Ellen White, and created the filing system for Ellen White's manuscripts that would be used by her staff during her final years and then by the White Estate.[12] While there, Peck also pieced together the beginnings of Ellen White's later work *Education*, and stirred a rebirth of educational fervor when she presented the material at an Australian Union Conference meeting.[13]

In 1900, Ellen White felt ready to return to her homeland. Sarah Peck and the rest of Mrs. White's ministry family boarded the *Moana* and sailed back to America, eventually settling at a home they called Elmshaven, near St. Helena, California.[14] During the next several years, she proved indispensable to Ellen White's ministry, especially in editing and business management.

Peck also had her own ministry to pursue. She helped start and teach an elementary school nearby (now Foothills Elementary), which she did while still working for Ellen White. It served as a model to demonstrate "manual training" in elementary education.[15] Peck herself taught skills like quilt making and carpentry.[16]

Education Leadership

Peck's success and abilities eventually drew her beyond the environs of Elmshaven. In 1908, to Ellen White's chagrin but with her blessing,[17] Sarah accepted a call to Union College in Nebraska to start and lead an Education Department (then called the Normal Department).[18] Besides being chair, Peck taught classes and

helped relocate the elementary school. Her students at Union repurposed her initials S. E. P. to mean "Solving Educational Problems."[19] The acronym aptly framed her career.

Returning to the west coast, Peck served as education secretary of the California Conference from 1914 to 1917. Then, the General Conference tapped her for the role of education secretary for the whole denomination.[20] During her time in that position (1918-1923), she worked with Alma McKibbin (1871-1974) and others to write an extensive curriculum for denominational schools. Peck herself wrote 20 books.[21] At the center of her work was the *True Education Reader* series, which provided real life character-building stories for elementary students.

Later Life

Sarah Peck retired to Angwin, California at age 55, noting that her prospects for further employment were "none, except on a self supporting basis" because a "degree from [an] accredited university [was] now required for any educational work"[22]—a great irony for a woman who helped build a global education system. As an industrious optimist, she took the opportunity to enjoy the familiar northern California landscape while she wrote, led teacher training, counseled young educators, and even took classes like Blackboard Drawing at Pacific Union College.[23]

Peck developed a series of popular lectures on the biblical sanctuary,[24] which she viewed as God's second book of revelation—with creation being the first and Scripture the third.[25] She designed and built a tabletop model of the tabernacle to use with her lectures, gathering building materials from around the world.[26] As she eloquently described the theological beauty she saw in the sanctuary, her pupils asked for copies of her lectures.[27] In answer to those requests, she published the culminating book of her career in 1968, *The Path to the Throne of God: The Gospel According to Moses*.

As Sarah's health failed, she supported the cause financially. She had accumulated savings through book royalties and frugality. Her denominational retirement also paid $39 per month (as of 1931), compared to her last General Conference salary of $28.25 per week in 1923.[28] One project to which she was most devoted was Rusangu Prepratory School in Zambia, where she sent several thousand dollars.[29]

Personality

Sarah Peck was a driven woman, who knew what she wanted and insisted on her boundaries. While she chaired the Education Department at Union College, a federal grand jury indicted her for refusing to give her age and marital status to the male census taker.[30] She never backed down, going to court and accepting a fine to protect her privacy.[31] Similarly, in her later years, she rebuffed pressure from denominational leaders to fund the general church coffers.[32] Instead, she sent generous donations to projects that she believed in.

Sarah's tenacity showed acutely in later life, when her body wore out but she determined to live to the century mark.[33] She reached that goal, living just two and a half months beyond her 100th birthday. The same tenacity made her hard to care for, as she kept firing the help or causing them to quit.[34] That strength of personality, though troubling to those who tried to manage her, was a gift that made her able to achieve so much for the Adventist mission.

Peck showed a softer side, too. Throughout her life, she collected and pressed flora of land and sea. She also sketched and painted the flowers and birds of South Africa, Australia, and America. Inside the cover of one sketchbook, she wrote, "Fidelity to nature is the religion of this art," suggesting a deep connection between her fascination with nature and her experience with God.[35]

In retirement, Sarah employed her loves of nature and art to design a home she named Gleneyry, perhaps after the castle Glen Erie in Colorado. Tucked in the trees of Angwin, California, near Pacific Union College, the house was complete with a castle-like great room ceiling, lily pond, stone walks, stone stairs, large seashells for landscape features, and a wide variety of flowers. On the mantle of the brick fireplace rested artifacts from her lifetime of service, such as a carved African elephant and other African handcrafts.

Legacy

Sarah Elizabeth Peck served the Adventist mission for almost 80 years as a teacher, ministry partner to Ellen White, writer, lecturer, and mentor. Professionally, her most notable contributions were the schools she helped start, the Education Department at Union College she formed, the curriculum she wrote, and the filing system she devised for Ellen White's manuscripts.

She stands as an example of the many early Adventist women who fashioned the Seventh-day Adventist Church into what Adventists experience today, but whose names are unknown to most who enjoy the fruit of their labor. Her vision, administrative prowess, teaching, writing, and tenacity helped shape the international Adventist education system. It is perhaps in the lives of those who have studied in the schools comprising that system that her legacy shows most vividly.

On June 17, 1968, the centenarian went to sleep to await the words, "Well done, good and faithful servant." The epithet on her headstone at St. Helena Public Cemetery, where she rests near workers like John Loughborough and Mary Ann (Marian) Davis and other giants in Adventism, reads simply, "Teacher."

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