

B. T. Roberts
(1823-93)

Free Methodist Historical Society

Newsletter

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Flights of Fancy

On long flights it's nice to have a good book or two for quiet moments. That's what I took along on my recent trip to Seattle Pacific University to celebrate the life of Lora Jones, alumna of the year.

The books I carried were special. When I arrived at SPU many of the characters who people the books jumped right off the page to meet me face to face. Lora Jones, for instance, was just a little Chinese toddler when I met her in the book; now she is 93. Then there's John Schlosser, now 87. I delighted in Ms. Jones' reminiscences about a community I know intimately through photographs. Her life is just one of many preserved in our archive's outstanding photo collection.

What a joy to travel also to Warm Beach. There I met folks known to me through faded slides and snapshots: Pauline Todd, a woman whose voice is recorded on tape in the Historical Center. Leona Fear, whose book *New Ventures* I have consulted a thousand times. And, after correcting my pronunciation of "Kinyarwanada," Tillman Houser chatted with me. Tillman compiled a botanical index I have consulted. We talked with people such as Raymond Banks, whom I met through postal stamps, and Ms. Helsel, who has a collection that needs a home.

The books I carried to Seattle were worn and cumbersome, but the stories they tell are livelier than any on sale at the airport. — Kate McGinn, Archivist



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**Do Practical
Good**
The heart
of a true Christian
is full of kindness
and sympathy. ... a
genuine experience
of saving grace will
set us at once to
using what influence
we have to promote
the happiness and
the spiritual welfare
of others. This is the
instinct of every soul
that is born from
above.

— B. T. Roberts, "Do Good," *The
Earnest Christian* (June 1885), 123.

Historic Chili Inn Saved

A legal breakthrough will preserve the historic tavern that B. T. Roberts bought in 1866 as he was founding (what is now) Roberts Wesleyan College.

The Rochester *Democrat and Chronicle* reported in January, "The 192-year-old Stagecoach Inn will be saved and the town's first Walgreens will be built. State Supreme Court Judge Evelyn Frazee confirmed Monday that a consent agreement was signed ... after six months of bargaining." Walgreens will build behind the inn, preserving the historic structure at the corner of Buffalo Rd. and Union St. in North Chili, and will also contribute \$50,000 toward renovation. The inn's first floor will be limited commercial space, while the second could accommodate a small museum.

Judge Frazee said, "It has been up and down, as in any negotiations. People were willing to talk and work things out, and that made all the difference."

History at General Conference

The Historical Center will sponsor several events during General Conference in Spring Arbor, Michigan, in July. These include three lunchtime presentations:

- "Edward Payson Hart: Barrister of Holiness," by Jon Kulaga on Saturday, July 7.
- "Populist Saints: B. T. and Ellen Roberts," by Howard Snyder on Monday, July 9.
- "Weeping May Endure for a Night: A Spiritual Journey," by Dr. Al Snyder on Wednesday, July 11.

Also scheduled is an oral history workshop on Wednesday morning. These events are open to all who are interested.

The Mission of the Free Methodist Historical Society is to preserve Free Methodist heritage and transmit it faithfully to each generation in order to assist the Free Methodist Church in fulfilling its mission.

From *Shepherd of the Hills* to *The Headhunter's Bride* — Protégé B. H. Pearson: Bell U

BY DONALD M. JOY

Born in 1928 and growing up in Kansas, I knew my parents read Harold Bell Wright's novels. Marvin and Marie Joy, my parents, were interested in Wright because B. H. Pearson, our Y.P.M.S. General Superintendent, had been "personal secretary to Harold Bell Wright." Our bookshelf carried Wright's *Shepherd of the Hills*, *The Calling of Dan Matthews*, and *When a Man's a Man*—to us, well-worn symbols of the radiant Pearson.

How the young Pearson was discovered and mentored by the million-selling novelist is an intriguing story.

B. H. Pearson's Childhood

As a child Benjamin Harold Pearson lived in the Big Bear end of the San Bernardino Mountains. His father was foreman of the Southern California Edison "pipeline" construction project. Harold (as he was called then) lived in a boarding house his parents operated near the Edison work camp. At age four, Harold was raising rabbits to augment the food supply and helping his mother gather firewood. At seven he began working as "back flagman" for the Edison survey party.

In 1902, when about eight, Pearson began school at Los Angeles Pacific Seminary grade school. In his second year of high school, however, he was struck down with appendicitis and nearly died from complications.

One day, recuperating on the porch hammock, he found a health tract with a handwritten note: "Harold Pearson from Emma Cease." Using the health tips, Harold "gained sixty pounds in sixty days." With that surge of "robust health," he went to the mountains to join the Edison work camp, again as "back flagger" for the surveyors.

Tragic Early Years of Harold Bell Wright

Novelist Harold Bell Wright grew up near Rome, New York. "Most people today are surprised to learn that during the first

quarter of the twentieth century the novels of Harold Bell Wright (1872–1944) outsold every other American writer," notes biographer Jerry Chudleigh. Newspapers "claimed Wright was the first person to become a millionaire by writing novels, and some say he was the first author to write a novel that reached a million sales."

Wright's childhood was profoundly chaotic. His alcoholic father abandoned his sons after Wright's mother died of tuberculosis when Harold was eleven. For years Wright was virtually homeless, staying with one family after another.

Often hungry, young Wright lived for a time in a charity house in Ohio. Here he formed his concepts about God and Christian principles. He read Shakespeare and other classics but always lamented his meager education.

Eventually Wright built a canoe and journeyed to find relatives in the Missouri Ozarks. With them he attended a Congregational church. One night during a revival the preacher failed to show up. The people appealed to Wright, and his impromptu sermon was so effective the church invited him to be their pastor!

Ordained in the Disciples of Christ/Christian Church, Wright pastored in Missouri and Kansas, and soon married. While pastoring in Kansas City, Missouri, he wrote *Shepherd of the Hills*, set in the Ozarks. Today the story is dramatized near Branson at the place Wright went to recover from "malaria."

Eventually diagnosed with tuberculosis, Wright and his family moved to Redlands, California, where in 1907–08 he served First Christian Church. He soon decided to devote full time and energy to writing. Meanwhile young Pearson, regaining strength after his appendicitis, rejoined his father's construction project in the San Bernardinos near Redlands.

Wright Meets Pearson

The novel Wright was researching in 1909–12 became his first bestseller, *Eyes of*

the World. Wright observed Redlands with keen imagination and soon formed a plot. He traveled to the San Bernardinos to experience places where scenes in the novel would unfold.

Part of the story was set in the very canyon where Edison was at work. Pearson recorded, "1911–12: Work[ed] for Southern California Edison Company in Mill Creek Canyon. There met Harold Bell Wright, the novelist. 1912–1915: Worked with Mr. Wright as his secretary. . . . April 13, 1914, Mr. Wright dedicated to me *The Eyes of the World*, the first book to go into 1,000,000 copies in first edition in the history of regular, royalty paying book business."

Pearson accompanied Wright to his newly-purchased ranch in Imperial Valley in the southeastern California desert, where Wright completed his novel.

Wright Dedicates Book to Pearson

The *Eyes of the World* dedication hints at the mentor-protégé relationship that developed on the Edison construction site:

To

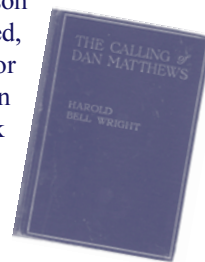
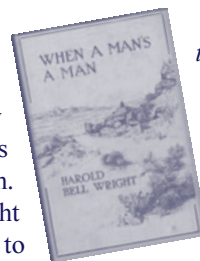
BENJAMIN H. PEARSON
STUDENT, ARTIST, GENTLEMAN
in appreciation of the friendship that began on the "Pipe-Line Trail," at the camp in the sycamores . . . and among the higher peaks of the San Bernardinos; and because this story will always mean more to him than to any one else,—this book, with all good wishes, is
DEDICATED.

H. B. W.

"Tecolote Rancho,"

April 13, 1914.

If you reach for an old family copy of *Eyes of the World*, as I did, you will find more clues. One of the color illustrations shows the young "artist," Aaron King, just arrived by train in "Fairlands," being interrogated by an older man, the novelist



Life of Harold Wright

Conrad Lagrange. The book's early pages introduce these two characters—a fictionalized version of the Wright-Pearson mentor-protégé relationship. As in real life, the fictional men formed a dynamic pair.

Pearson, the Apostle

Pearson was far from home, working for a rising novelist. Back in Los Angeles, his mother was desperate. Not only had Harold left home; he was now a novelist's personal secretary.

Pearson's mother desperately "prayed him home." In Los Angeles, Pearson records, on February 23, 1917, in the Hermon FM Church, "Christ brought me to the altar, and there a permanent relationship with Him as Saviour began."

Pearson soon received his cross-cultural calling: "Easter Sunday, 1917, the first street meeting begun at corner of Leroy and North Main Streets. From then on continuously occupied in S.S. & mission meetings." In 1919 he became superintendent of FM Mexican missions. Pearson was instantly an apostle to Los Angeles' street kids.

Pearson later finished college at the University of Southern California and earned an M.A. degree at USC.

Pearson, the Missionary

In 1935 General Conference unexpectedly elected Pearson the first superintendent of the Young People's Missionary Society (Y.P.M.S.). He could remain in California, overseeing Mexican missions half-time. Four years later, however, General Conference required a move to FM headquarters at Winona Lake, Indiana. Separated from the mission work, Pearson grew restless. He tried to resign his Y.P.M.S. job and take appointment with the FM mission board.

Missions secretary Harry Johnson sent Pearson as one of "three spies" to assess opportunities in South America, and Pearson wrote a book reporting the opportunities he discovered. The mission board, however, was not ready to send missionaries, so Pearson continued heading the Y.P.M.S. In 1943 he

resigned and, with the consent of Bishop Marston and the mission board, embarked for South America with another sponsor (though retaining FM ordination).



Illustration from *Eyes of the World* — a picture of Wright and Pearson?

Pearson reports: "August 13, 1945, Mrs. Emma C. Pearson, our daughter Esther Elizabeth and I arrived in Medellin, Colombia ... as the first representatives of The Inter American Missionary Society (now OMS International)." Mrs. Charles Cowman, founder of OMS, single-handedly formed a new mission entity to sponsor Pearson's work, funding it herself, when the OMS board refused her nomination of Pearson to be the new OMS president.

Pearson tells how in 1949 he "became director and Vice President of the corporation which we know today as World Gospel Crusades." In 1950: "Went to Formosa as a member of the first Crusade team. ... Also gathered material for *The Headhunter's Bride*." In 1955 he "became responsible for the administration of World Gospel Crusades and Mrs. Pearson and I moved to Los Angeles."

Years earlier while serving in Formosa (Taiwan), Mrs. Cowman learned of a phenomenal conversion. The story became the basis of Pearson's 1951 book (written at Cowman's insistence), *The Headhunter's*

Bride. Pearson dedicated the book to Cowman. Inside the back cover of my copy I pasted the biographical material from the dust jacket:

Once again B. H. Pearson has turned his genius for transporting his readers to faraway places to writing a story well-timed to appear at this dramatic hour in Formosa's history.

Dr. Pearson began his literary career as an associate of Harold Bell Wright, internationally known author and novelist. Since then, with a background of extensive travel in foreign countries, unusual success as a lecturer, and popular acceptance in the literary field, he has earned a well established place for himself. ...

On the Island of Formosa, [Pearson] lived among the tribal people, gaining first-hand information which provided a rich, authentic background for the book. Through his eyes you may witness the breath-taking loveliness and sheer grandeur of a Formosan jungle scene, you are privileged to share his intimate knowledge of Taiyal customs and practices, and you will come to appreciate the beautiful girl who exchanged her place in the palace for a jungle hut and eventually led Chiba Village to the Heavenly Chief.

— Mrs. Chas. E. Cowman

Harold Bell Wright also "lived among the people," crafting cultural settings for his fiction. Now, protégé Pearson uses the same tactic to weave an authentic setting for the drama of a chief's conversion. The novelist mentor had tutored Pearson on cultural ambience in the mountains above "Fairlands" while finishing his spell-binding story, *Eyes of the World*.

Sources: Pearson's three-page outline autobiography dated August 21, 1973 (when Pearson was 80) is a key source. Pearson also dictated a 1976 autobiographical audiotape, now archived at the MMHC, along with a 24-page typescript. The Wright chronology is inferred from two online resources: *Who Was Harold Bell Wright*, by Gerry Chudleigh, and *The Social Conscience of Harold Bell Wright: The Man and His Work*, by Joyce Kinkead (linked at the end of the Chudleigh "official Harold Bell Wright website," easily located on Google). The late Spring Arbor College professor Ralph Carey discussed Wright's novels in his 1971 doctoral thesis, "Best Selling Religion: A History Of Popular Religious Thought in America as Reflected in Religions Best Sellers, 1850-1960."

Book Review

Wilderness Forever: Howard Zahniser and the Path to the Wilderness Act, by Mark Harvey (University of Wisconsin Press, 2005). 325 pp. ISBN 0295-89532-1 (clothbound).

This is the story of Howard Zahniser's decades-long epic struggle for the Wilderness Act, the landmark 1964 legislation that today protects over one hundred million U.S. acres.

Howard was born in 1906 to Archie and Bertha Zahniser. Archie pastored FM churches in the Oil City Conference, Pennsylvania. The Zahnisers gave their son an interest in nature and an even-tempered disposition. From his father Howard learned dedication to one's calling, patience, and a sense of humor. Bertha loved singing hymns at church. This sparked Howard's lifelong love of music; later he was drawn to the love of his life, Alice, by her talent as a singer.

Howard benefited from his parents' devotion to reading. He was enchanted also with outdoor life. He learned that human health and happiness depend on regular outings into natural settings.

Graduating from Greenville College in 1928, Howard first taught high school English. Later he worked as a writer in the Department of Commerce in Washington, D.C., then with the Bureau of Biological Survey, Department of Agriculture. He wrote many press releases, speeches, and radio talks, and also began writing a column for *Nature* magazine.

Howard had become disenchanted with the Free Methodists. He disagreed with some of the church's restrictions, and his inquiring mind led him to rather different views. A lifelong religious seeker,

Zahniser came to a settled faith in his later years. Though not committed denominationally, he was devoted to the Christian faith and as a conservationist drew on Christian understandings. Protecting wilderness was stewardship of God's creation.

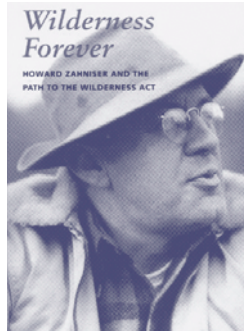
Working with the Agriculture Department during World War II, Zahniser promoted the Victory Gardens campaign which sought to save energy by encouraging home food-raising. In 1945 he became executive secretary and editor for the Wilderness Society. This meant a twenty-five percent pay cut, but Zahniser's reaction to the atom bomb as the advent of a new age of technological power over nature helped cement his decision.

Zahniser led repeated wilderness protection battles at places such as Olympic National Park in Washington State and at numerous sites of proposed dams within primitive areas and national parks. Perceiving that a comprehensive national wilderness act was needed in order to avoid these constant local battles, Zahniser began work on broad-scope legislation.

After many, many drafts, struggles, and compromises, the eloquent Wilderness Act was finally complete in 1964. Zahniser could see its passage was imminent. Early on the morning of May 5, however, his diseased heart quit. He was fifty-eight. Five months later the Wilderness Act was signed by President Johnson, with Alice Zahniser present.

Howard's grave at Tionesta, Pennsylvania, is marked by a plain boulder with a bronze plaque. North of town along the Allegheny River a historical marker commemorates Zahniser and the Wilderness Act for which he gave his life.

— Janice M. Snyder, Wilmore, Kentucky



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