
Counsel to a Nervous Bridegroom

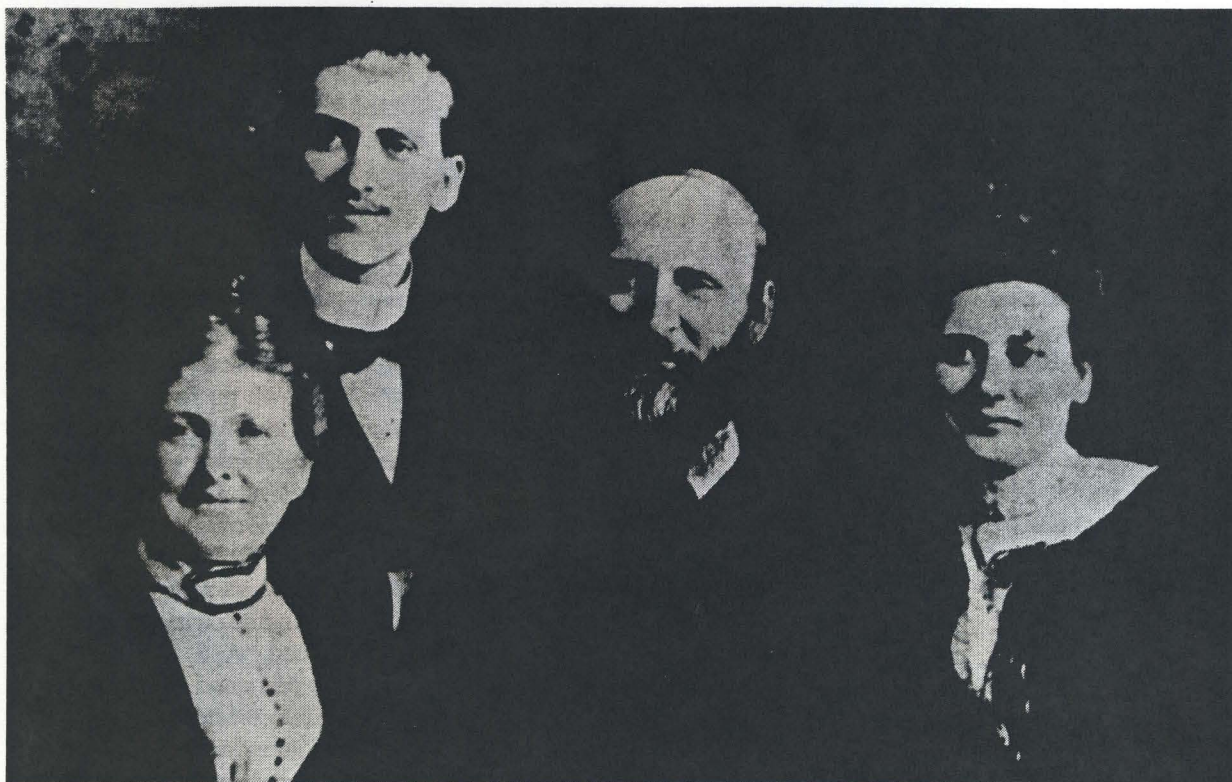
By Roger W. Coon

Ellen G. White was not only possessed of a deliciously lively, vibrant sense of humor,¹ she was also a warm, gentle-hearted Christian woman, wife and mother. Hers was an exceedingly robust, down-to-earth humanity, which was never better illustrated than in some cogent advice given to an exceedingly nervous 26-year-old bridegroom, Daniel T. Bourdeau, on his wedding night in 1861.

Daniel, with his brother Augustin C. (one year older), lived in Bordoville, Franklin County, Vermont² where Daniel had been born on December 28, 1835.³ This little hamlet in northwestern Vermont, a dozen miles northeast of the county seat of St. Albans, and another dozen miles south of the Canadian border, drew its name from some illustrious forebears of these two brothers. They, in turn, would themselves achieve a certain fame as pioneer leaders in the early, formative days of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the mid-19th century.

In 1855, Daniel, at the age of 20, was teaching in some of the eastern townships of "Lower Canada" and doing missionary work for the Baptist Church into which he had been baptized at the age of 11, when disquieting news reached his ears. His parents and brother, he learned, had accepted the teachings of and joined the membership of a small, strange ex-Millerite "offshoot" which five years later would take the denominational title of "Seventh-day Adventist."

Daniel was acutely distressed, believing that his family down in Vermont had been badly misled and deceived. He determined to fortify himself with unassailable arguments against this cult, the



The Daniel T. Bourdeau family were among the first French-speaking people to embrace the Advent message. Marion Saxby Bourdeau (left) is shown with her husband, Daniel (center) and their two children, Augustine J. S. Bourdeau and Patience Bourdeau-Sisco. A J. S. died tragically in 1915.

The Bourdeau Brothers, thus, are believed to have become the first of French descent to have joined the SDA church.⁵

Although now officially a member of this denomination, Daniel was still—to use his own words—an “unbeliever in the visions,” but this would change on Sunday morning, June 21, 1857, when the 22-year-old convert witnessed Ellen White in vision at the Buck’s Bridge Adventist church in New York.

Responding to James White’s invitation to examine his wife in the vision state, young Daniel, seeking

to satisfy my mind as to whether she breathed or not, I first put my hand on her chest sufficiently long to know that there was no more heaving of her lungs than there would have been had she been a corpse. I then took my hand and placed it over her mouth, pinching her nostrils between my thumb and forefinger, so that it was impossible for her to exhale or inhale air, even if she had desired to do so. I held her thus with my hand about ten minutes, long enough for her to suffocate under ordinary circumstances. She was not in the least affected by this ordeal.⁶

And writing about this unusual experience on February 1, 1891, at the age of 55, Bourdeau remarked that “since witnessing this wonderful phenomenon, I have not once been inclined to doubt the divine origin of her visions.”⁷

Shortly thereafter, Daniel had the opportunity of making the personal acquaintance of James and Ellen White during a visit to Battle Creek, Michigan. And he improved the time during this visit to the Adventist “Jerusalem” in studying and trying his hand at writing. He wrote a number of persuasive pamphlets upon various aspects of what was then called “present truth.” Some were penned in the French, in which he was most fluent, and some in English. These were well received, and with the encouragement of his initial modest success, he proceeded to translate several English volumes into French. But he continued to devote most of his writing time to articles for SDA periodicals.

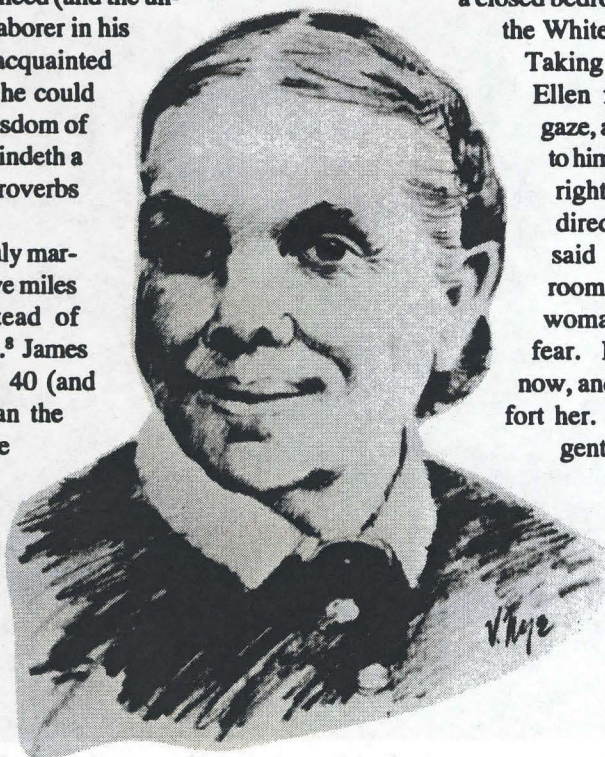
His missionary outreach further broadened with a venture into public evangelistic labors, and at the age of 23, Daniel T. Bourdeau was ordained to the gospel ministry of his church.

He quickly discovered his need (and the undoubted advantage) of a co-laborer in his work; and after becoming acquainted with Miss Marion J. Saxby, he could vouch for the veracity and wisdom of Solomon's dictum, "Whoso findeth a wife findeth a good thing" (Proverbs 18:22).

Daniel and Marion were duly married in 1861 at Bakersfield, five miles from the ancestral homestead of Bordoville, in a private home.⁸ James White, who had just turned 40 (and was only 15 years older than the bridegroom), happened to be in the area, so he consented to perform the marriage ceremony. His wife Ellen, 33, agreed to honor the occasion by offering a prayer of blessing to conclude the service.

As the nuptials were celebrated rather late in the day, the newlyweds decided to postpone their departure on the honeymoon trip until the next day, accepting instead the invitation of their host to spend their first night as man and wife in the home where the ceremony had taken place. The Whites were also overnight house-guests there.

About 9 p.m., as Ellen went upstairs to her room before retiring, she discovered an exceedingly nervous 25-year-old bridegroom pacing up and down the hallway outside



The image of a smiling Ellen White is consistent with her use of witty remarks to ease the embarrassment of others.

a closed bedroom door adjoining the room the Whites were to share.

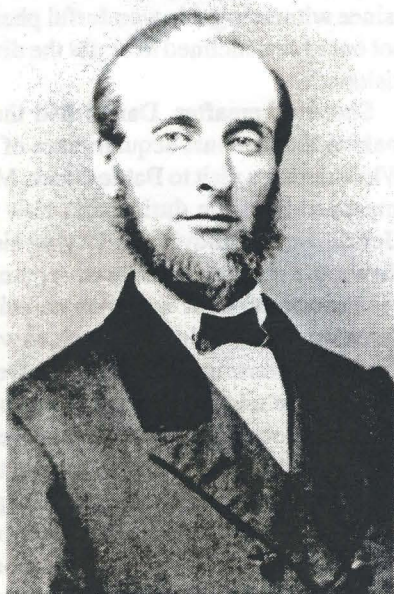
Taking in the situation at a glance, Ellen fixed Daniel with a steady gaze, and earnestly yet kindly spoke to him in her characteristically forthright manner. Motioning in the direction of the closed door, she said gently, "Daniel, inside that room there is a frightened young woman in bed totally petrified with fear. Now you go in to her right now, and you love her, and you comfort her. And, Daniel, you treat her gently, and you treat her tenderly, and you treat her lovingly. It will do her good."⁹

And then, with just a trace of a smile on her face, Ellen added, "And, Daniel, it will do you good, too!"

Ellen White was a woman of great humanity, of great compassion, of great understanding, and of great charity. She was possessed of a very large heart. She understood instinctively—and sympathetically—the emotional needs, as

well as the traumatic distress, of a terrified bride and an exceedingly nervous bridegroom. And she dealt not only warmly and humanly, but also sensibly, in this situation in a manner that was forever after appreciated by both of the couple.

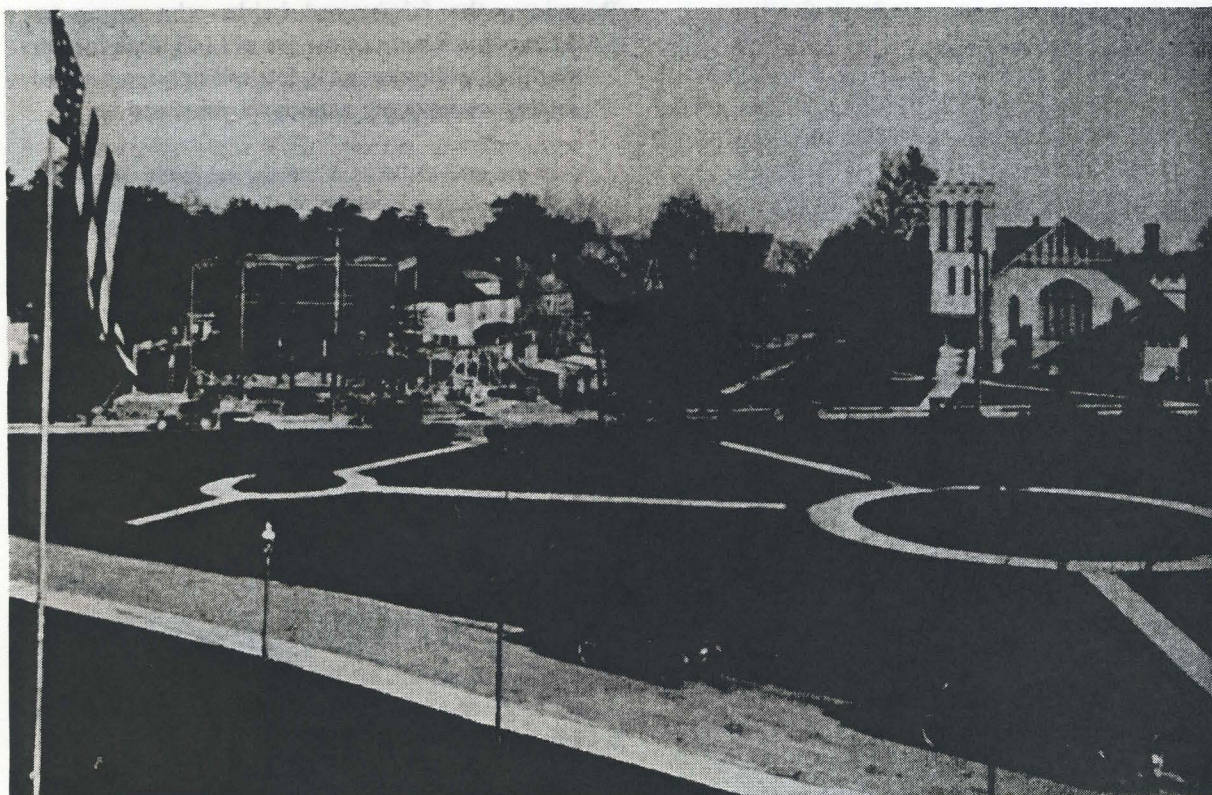
Daniel and Marion labored together in ministry, some-



Daniel T. Bourdeau



Marion J. Saxby



The triangular park in front of the old central building of the General Conference in Takoma Park was the site of an accident in 1915. In that year lightning struck the giant oak that once stood in the circle to the right. Then it struck again, with tragic results.

times with his older brother, A. C. Bourdeau. They served variously in Canada, the New England states, and New York, before going west to California with J. N. Loughborough to open new work in the Golden State. They also pioneered in several other western states before returning east.

The Bourdeaus twice served as a missionary team in Europe, for a total of seven years. In 1876, during their first term, Daniel spent much of his time working with our first SDA missionary to Europe, John Nevins Andrews, in both editorial activities and in public evangelism.

During the second term (1882) he and his brother A.C. worked in France, Switzerland, Rumania, Corsica, Italy, and Alsace-Lorraine. Their success was little short of phenomenal; sometimes an entire congregation of Sunday-keepers, together with their pastor, would become converted to the Adventist faith!

Daniel Bourdeau died in Grand Rapids, Michigan, on June 30, 1905, six months shy of the age of 70. He was survived by his wife Marion, and their two children: Dr. Patience S. Bourdeau-Sisco, medical director of an Adventist sanitarium in Grand Rapids, who

also doubled as medical superintendent of the West Michigan Conference; and Augustine J. S. Bourdeau, missionary secretary of the California-Nevada Conference, who was also connected with the Pacific Press Publishing Company at Mountain View, California, and the Review and Herald Publishing Association in Washington, D.C.¹⁰

This son survived the passing of his late father by only 10 years. For, on July 19, 1915, on the day of Ellen White's second funeral (of three),¹¹ Elder Augustine J. S. Bourdeau, 40, met with a fatal accident that was as incredible as it was tragic.

The younger Elder Bourdeau had now made his home in Takoma Park, Maryland, where he worked in the Review and Herald Publishing house next door to the General Conference world headquarters of the church. On this particular day the city had just experienced a tremendous thunder-and-lightning storm. When it appeared to have abated, Elder Bourdeau, joined by his 10-year-old daughter, Marguerite, and 15-year-old Edwin Andrews (grandson of pioneer John Nevins Andrews), walked across the street to survey the damage.



Edwin Andrews, grandson of J. N. Andrews, was one of the unfortunate victims when lightning struck twice.

There, in a park-like triangle of land (upon which the present edifice of the Takoma Park Church was built in the middle 1950s)¹² they inspected a large oak which had been growing on a spot which today lies directly beneath the pulpit of the Takoma Park Church. This tree had, scant moments before, sustained a fatal direct strike by lightning. Now, as the trio gathered under its branches, lightning again struck at exactly the same place, knocking all three to the ground.

Elder Bourdeau and young Andrews were killed instantly.¹³ Marguerite was injured so severely that she carried scars on an immobilized wrist to the day of her death at age 78 in 1983.

Marguerite Bourdeau Gilbert Fields alone survived to tell her pastor—the writer of these lines—of the appreciation of her paternal grandparents, Daniel and Marion Bourdeau for the wit and wisdom of Ellen White. For it was Grandmother Marion Saxby-

Bourdeau—the frightened bride—who came to Marguerite's bedroom on the eve of Marguerite's own wedding, in Baltimore, in 1925, to tell first-hand of her interesting wedding experience 64 years earlier:

Your grandfather, D.T. Bourdeau, originally had intended to remain a bachelor—he thought he could serve the Lord best as an unmarried man. But Sister White told him it would be better if he married and had a wife to take care of him. He prayed about it and felt impressed to ask me to become his wife.

On our wedding night, after Sister White told him to come into my bedroom and to treat me gently and lovingly, he nervously did so. He found me clad in my long winter underwear, and I was facing the wall. And I stayed that way for six months!¹⁴

Marion did not expand on the details of her celibate stand-off to her granddaughter, but two children were born of this union a few years later! But because she shared this interesting incident from her honeymoon with Marguerite in 1925, we today are the richer for this insight into Ellen White's character and personality in the story of the prophet's counsel to a nervous bridegroom on his wedding night!

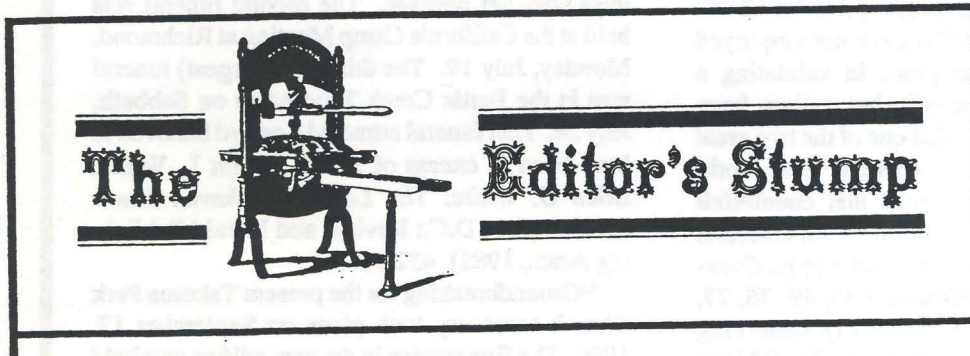


Marion J. Saxby-Bourdeau

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Contributors

ROGER W. COON is associate secretary of the Ellen G. White Estate in Silver Spring, Maryland. He is currently writing a new college-level textbook for prophetic guidance courses and two supplementary reading books on the most significant visions and messages of Ellen G. White.



Among the articles in this issue is one in which Roger W. Coon passes on a story about

Ellen White which has been handed down from generation to generation of the D. T. Bourdeau family. It is usually difficult to prove or disprove the authenticity of such stories. There is no reason to doubt the Bourdeau story, yet even the most honest among us are subject to the tricks of memory. Details are forgotten, words spoken by one person are attributed to another, and time collapses and expands as we seek to recall events or advice from the past in ways that might be useful today.

Regardless of the degree of authenticity one attributes to these stories as accounts of the distant past, they are fascinating evidence of the influence and impact of Ellen White on her spiritual descendants. Often these stories provide a positive counter-balance to unflattering stereotypes of Ellen White. One sometimes hears that Mrs. White said every woman should have a red dress in her wardrobe. The story provides relief from

the image of Ellen White's own clothing which apparently included only dark, solid colors. Actually, the story comes to us through Ellen White's granddaughter, who only reported Ellen White's having told a particular woman that a red dress would look nice on her.

The Bourdeau family's story about Ellen White's advice to a nervous bridegroom similarly counters the image of Ellen White as a straight-laced prude. In Ellen White's own time, there was little call to repeat the story publicly, for most people were more comfortable if such matters were kept out of public discourse. Today we tend to be suspicious of someone who offers domestic advice without a hearty endorsement of physical affection and intimacy in marriage. So the story is no longer merely a private memory passed on by a single family, it now becomes a part of the Adventist heritage.