

# The Voice of H.M.S. Richards

by John Robertson

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He has just returned from Oregon and is preparing for a trip to northern California the next weekend. His calendar is full of appointments for funerals, weddings, worship services, pastors' meetings, college assemblies, luncheons, a broadcaster's convention, and even a youth congress in Bermuda, demanding more than 100 public speaking appointments in 23 states and six foreign countries this year. In addition to this rigorous schedule, this 88-year old preacher prepares 52 sermons a year for an international weekly radio program.

Harold Marshall Sylvester Richards was born in 1894 to a family of preachers. His father was a Seventh-day Adventist evangelist and conference president. His English grandfather was converted to Christianity by Salvation Army founder General William Booth and later toured the United States as a circuit preacher and companion of John Wesley.<sup>1</sup>

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John Robertson, producer for the Voice of Prophecy, received a master of divinity degree from Andrews University and holds a doctor of ministry degree from Fuller Theological Seminary.

The Wesley connection is especially important to Richards, because John Wesley is his "favorite character outside the Bible." He believes Wesley's combination of education and humility serves as a model for his own life. "He knew Latin, Greek, Hebrew, German, French, and Italian," says Richards, "and he always showed deference to others, even his opponents."

From his earliest moments, H.M.S. Richards knew what it meant to travel and preach. His parents put him in a pillow-lined box and took him on their evangelistic tours. From his baby box on the back row of the tents, he would point to the charts depicting the wild beasts of Daniel and Revelation and holler, "Moo! Cow!" More than once his mother had to banish him from the meeting.

As soon as he was old enough, Richards' parents left him with his grandparents, the Sylvesters. Since his parents were gone much of the time, his grandparents became a second set of parents. He quickly adapted a neighbor girl's names for his grandparents: Two Pops and Two Moms.

These substitute parents settled down in a rough cabin on the eastern slopes of the Rocky Mountains about 30 miles from Loveland, Colorado. The only way to get to the cabin was by horse and wagon. Richards spent many summers at the cabin picking raspberries from sunup to sundown. Late in

the fall, he would help his grandparents bury the vines for the winter so that they wouldn't freeze. H.M.S. Richards' grandparents were a major influence in his development. Two Pops—Jasper Newton Sylvester—told stories of the gold rush days. Very much the frontiersman, he was an excellent shot with a rifle and also astonished the young Richards by pulling out his own infected teeth with a pair of pliers.

One of Richards' most treasured memories is the last night he spent with his Two Pops: "The night my grandfather died I was alone with him. He was a very strong man, and, in spite of everything I could do, he got out of bed, went over the the sideboard, and got his Bible. 'Now Harold,' he said, 'you're going to be a minister.' Turning to the second chapter of First Corinthians, he read the entire chapter to me, emphasizing the last part, 'for spiritual things are spiritually discerned.' Then he said, 'If you're going to be a minister, you've got to be a spiritual man. No man has the right to be a minister if he isn't spiritual.' Then he died in my arms."<sup>2</sup>

The influence of his grandmother was just as significant. During his early years, while his parents were out preaching for weeks at a time, she was his mother. A witty woman, full of grim humor, she continued to influence Richards even after he graduated from Campion Academy in 1914. Between the ages of 18 and 20, Richards held evangelistic meetings and saw no need to go to college. But Two Moms insisted, even selling her family home to help finance the venture. When Richards went to Washington Missionary College (now Columbia Union College), she went along and even continued as a live-in mother on his first preaching assignment in Ottawa, Canada. A few years later he married Mable Eastman.

Richards' mother shaped his life through her remarkably gentle, patient personality. "Her great influence in my life has been to shame me in my proneness to irritability. Her sweetness and loveliness are what I think Christ wants Christians to have. Her

love, her kindness and sweetness, and her interest in me have influenced me beyond measure."<sup>3</sup>

But the strongest early influence on H.M. S. Richards came from his own father, H.M.J. Richards, despite the frequent and extended absences. One of Richards' earliest memories is his father's offer to pay him a silver dollar if he could read the Bible through. The offer, made even before he had started school was taken up; Two Pops had taught him to read.

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Richards recalls seeing his father studying in the corner of a bedroom, surrounded by dry-goods boxes disguised as bookcases. As Richards got older, his father would discuss the art of preaching with him. He still remembers his father's words: "Now son, use three or four strong texts on your point. Drive these texts clear through your hearer's minds by your arguments and clinch them on the other side. Don't use all the texts you know. Save some in reserve to use in answering any questions which might come after you have finished your sermon. Also draw the attention of the audience more to what the Bible says than to what you say."<sup>4</sup>

His father also encouraged him to tell stories in the pulpit. "My father was the greatest storyteller I ever knew. He knew Aesop's Fables by heart and had many books of illustrations which he also committed to memory. In preaching he used few stories except Bible stories, but, in his contact with all kinds of people, he continually used stories to illustrate religious ideas."<sup>5</sup>

Many of Richards' values were tested early when he discovered that his family belonged to a small religious group that was often ridiculed. He still remembers hearing people yell insults and abuse outside the tent during his father's evangelistic meetings. At school, older students would laugh at his faith. One time they hoisted him up on a fence and taunted, "Now preach us a sermon, you Advent." Richards did. He told them Christ was coming soon and that they would be sorry for behaving so badly.

It might seem that a sensitive boy who experienced so much ridicule would withdraw and spend the rest of his life in retreat. But Richards credits a single incident with preventing that from happening. One day some older boys were tormenting him on his way home from school, and Richards was almost hit by one of the boys, who was swinging his books around at the end of a leather strap. Though Richards' parents had taught him never to fight back, for some reason, he took a swipe at the tormenter and knocked him down. The incident not only saved him from additional trouble at the hands of the boys, but it also gave Richards a new sense of confidence. Even though he belonged to an unpopular religion, he could stand up for himself.

As a young man, Richards was deeply moved by the lives of two people he respected greatly—Theodore Roosevelt and Ellen White. For understandable reasons, Roosevelt had been his boyhood hero. "He was my idol because he was a physical weakling in early life. But he became a strong man." If Teddy had made a success of his life, even though he was pushed around as a boy, then so could Harold. Roosevelt had made a deep impression on young Harold when he made a visit to Denver. The Rough Rider strode out of the Brown Palace Hotel dressed "like a President ought to dress," complete with silk hat and gloves.

Richards decided to be baptized during the summer before his thirteenth birthday. His father and an associate, L.A. Springer,

were holding tent meetings outside Loveland, Colorado, and Richards and his brother attended the meetings to help increase the attendance figures. One Saturday afternoon Springer held a meeting for all the young people and invited them to commit their lives to Jesus Christ. The meeting had all the trappings of an early Adventist evangelistic meeting—the smell of canvas and sawdust, the appeal to come forward, the song "That Gate Ajar for Me." Richards accepted the invitation and later was baptized in a lake near Loveland, the same lake in which he had learned to fish and swim. He remembers, "I could see Long's Peak, my favorite mountain. I remember promising the Lord that I would be faithful to Him as long as that mountain stood."<sup>6</sup>

Ellen White was partly responsible for Richards' decision to become a minister. In Boulder in 1909, on her way back from Washington, D.C., to St. Helena after attending her last General Conference session, Ellen White stopped at the Chatauqua campground for a preaching service. Young Harold was part of the "platform boys" crew, helping to set up chairs.

During White's sermon, Richards sat on the edge of the platform. "She was just a regular old grandmother when she preached," he recalls, "kind and clear-voiced. But when she prayed, the entire mood changed. People in the audience were weeping. It was during that prayer that I decided to be a minister, not a lawyer. I had been attracted to law because there were several attorneys in my heritage."<sup>7</sup>

Both Richards' characteristic sensitivity and his willingness to stand up for what he believed, showed up in his ministry. During one of his earliest evangelistic meetings, held at a dance hall on a lake near Pike's Peak, one of his potential converts committed suicide. Richards had a hard time forgiving himself for not being able to help her, brooding over it for months.

The fighting spirit was also evident. Richards was asked to conduct evangelistic meetings in Millerton, Pennsylvania, near

the New York line. The only building in town large enough for an audience was the Odd Fellows Hall. But the building was owned by the local mortician, who refused to rent the building, announcing his strong dislike of preachers. Richards went to visit the man one day, and discovered that the mortician was reading the sports section of the newspaper. A fight between Jess Willard and Jack Johnson was soon to take place. Richards commented on the upcoming bout, and the mortician instantly challenged him to a fight. If Richards won, he would get the hall for the meetings. If he lost, there would be no meetings.

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Richards, who learned some boxing from an older student at Campion Academy many years earlier, reluctantly agreed. After seven rounds, the mortician was unable to get up. Richards got the hall and baptized 26 people at the conclusion of the meetings.

Another example of Richards' willingness to fight took place in Alhambra, California, in 1929. Richards again found opposition to his church; this time from a Protestant minister who was fond of publicly discrediting the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The minister even took out a full-page newspaper advertisement in which he condemned the Adventist "heresy," invited Richards to engage in an open debate, and promised to "expose" Richards at his next meeting. Richards, not preaching that night, went to hear himself ridiculed. The church was filled to capacity, so Richards took his place standing at the back with many others. He listened politely until

the preacher accused Richards of saying that there was a mistake in the Bible. Unable to let such a charge go unchallenged, Richards shouted from the back of the church, "That's a lie!" After a few moments of stunned silence, the meeting finished in great confusion. That was the last night he was bothered by the preacher during his stay in Alhambra.

It is worth noting that Richards himself sometimes resorted to theatrics. On occasion, he would bring a stack of his opponent's books into the pulpit with him, read from them one by one, and ceremoniously drop them on the floor. Then he would hold up his Bible and read an appropriate text. More than once he had a Hollywood stuntman dressed as an ape walk into his meetings. Richards would use this "missing link" to introduce his discussion of the flaws in the theory of evolution.

The early feeling that he was part of a minority has never left Richards. Prior to World War I, he was preaching about Armageddon when many Protestants were preaching peace. In the 1920's he was preaching conservative values when bobbed hair, flappers, alcohol, and the expanding movie industry dominated the rest of society. While many other members of the clergy were preaching about social ills—child labor and war—Richards made personal invitations to accept salvation in Jesus Christ.

For all the theatrics he used, it has always been important to H.M.S. Richards that his faith be reasoned. He remembers finding a box of books in his father's barn one day. The collection included Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason*, complete with his father's notes in the margin: "Beware" and "This is dangerous." He also found a copy of John Harvey Kellogg's *The Living Temple*, with similar denunciations in the margin.<sup>8</sup> Richards was fascinated with the book, and decided that he must continue to read the

works of people who disagreed with him.

He honed his reading skills at the local public library on his way home from school every day. He avidly read *The New Republic*, the old *Literary Digest*, and H.L. Mencken's *American Mercury*. As a high school student, he was well acquainted with writers like Robert La Follette, Eugene V. Debs, and others of the "progressive era." He credits the Debating Society at Campion Academy, the only regular Saturday night social activity, with giving him the tools to reason through such works.

Richards is convinced that his wide reading has greatly strengthened his faith by forcing him to think through his beliefs. Perhaps this explains his commitment to his library on which he has spent thousands of hours and dollars. The 21' x 27' room is overwhelmed by more than 8,000 books (another 2,000 are in the house and garage). A small desk sits under a window in one corner of the room. A sign on the door in the opposite corner announces the room's function: "Necessarium."

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His habit is to be in the library at five or six o'clock every morning and read for two or three hours before breakfast. Much of that time is spent with the Bible.

Richards has frequently stated his belief that reading the Bible from cover to cover is the best way to understand it. He follows his own advice. Every January, he reads the Bible straight through in about 75 hours "to get an airplane view." He reads nothing else until he finishes—no newspapers, magazines, or books of any kind. Then from

February through December, he reads the Bible through two or three more times. In addition, he reads the New Testament through every month.

Part of the reading before breakfast may include commentaries, especially the older ones by Adam Clarke, John Calvin, and Matthew Henry. He appreciates the scholarly, conservative, loyal attitude these men bring to the Bible. He also likes more recent theologians like F.F. Bruce, Helmut Thielicke, and C.S. Lewis. These men appeal to him because their books are clear and well-reasoned—characteristics that he thinks are also important in sermons: "My notes are built according to the way the mind works," he explains. "One thing is true; therefore, another is true. Just simple argument, very clear. People are persuaded by clear explanation. Clarity is supreme with me."

His reading still ranges into many areas. On one typical day, he read *Newsweek* and *U.S. News* completely through, finished a biography of Beethoven ("It was tough going; I'm not a musician"), studied a section of Matthew Henry's commentary, and read a new commentary of Jeremiah by Charles Swindoll. Six to eight hours of reading and browsing a day is not unusual.

He subscribes to more than 60 journals, and the list offers more clues to his wide-ranging interests. He reads several news journals from different political perspectives, including some published in Europe and the Middle East. He loves archeology (*Biblical Archaeologist*, *Archaeology*, *Biblical Archaeology Review*, *Bible and Spade*), and science (*Science News*, *Science and Scripture*). He keeps up with developments in the media, literature ("The *New York Times* Book Reviews are the best") and religion. He subscribes to nearly every Adventist church periodical published and gets several devotional and sermon-related journals as well.

Richards reserves afternoons for writing letters, and lighter reading. Biographies fill a significant portion of the library, although more than 90 percent of the library is

religious. He feels his collection is weak in reference works. "Also, I'd love to have a set of the great classics in English literature, just for the pleasure of reading them," he says. His habit of reading through large works may soon get him into Blackstone's four-volume set, *Commentaries on the Laws of England*. Remember, if I wasn't a preacher, I'd be a lawyer," he says again. He wishes more preachers would read law. "It would help them think straight."

He feels rather well educated in the history of philosophy and is grateful for the knowledge. "I feel it's given me some perspective for many of the scientific arguments I read today," he says. Plato and Aristotle are not strangers to him. In fact, he believes Plato "was very near God" and "almost found him by searching."

None of his reading diminishes his faith. He has no doubts about his faith, or the doctrines of the Adventist church. "I was fully inoculated as a boy. I've never been plagued by doubts. I'm always reading with a view to strengthening my faith, not to weakening it."

**H**is unwavering faith has also helped him over some rough spots in his ministry. One painful experience occurred when he was pulled by his conference superiors from an ongoing series of evangelistic meetings in Lodi, California, in the 1930s. The meetings were going well, but they weren't finished when he was suddenly sent to another town. "What men would never think of doing as individuals," he says, reflecting on the incident, "they'll sometimes do as committees." Richards believes in obeying authority, so he went. "I can put up with a lot, as long as I get to preach," he explains.

On another occasion, a California conference sold one of Richards' "tabernacles" for less than it was worth. Those tabernacles were built with 1" x 12" pine boards and seated more than 1,000 people. The floor was made of tarpaper over dirt, covered by sawdust and burlap. The conference sold

one of these buildings for \$1,000, after paying \$10,000 for it a few weeks earlier. The decision bewildered and angered Richards: "At least it could have become a church." Again, his loyalty to the church prevented him from reacting in a public way.

When he first decided to venture into radio broadcasting, he received strong opposition from many people in the church, including many officials. "When I was trying to start things, level-headed men said, 'You want to go on radio? They advertise liquor and tobacco on the radio. I don't think you're doing right.'" But to such "counsel of the brethren," Richards quickly responded, "If I had a chance to preach in Rome and the Pope was in the audience, I'd jump at it. I'd love to go to the Vatican and give a series of morning devotionals."

Richards even had people paraphrase the Apostle Paul's words about the devil being the "Prince of the Power of the Air," giving that as a reason why he should not preach over the radio. In fact, several conferences officially banned his radio broadcast in their territory. Most of the early opposition melted in the face of Richards' obvious success with the medium. However, the Voice of Prophecy has remained an independent organization within Adventism in certain respects. From the early beginnings of his radio ministry in the 1930s, Richards' salary has come entirely from contributions to his radio program. To this day, Richards and the entire Voice of Prophecy staff, including ordained ministers, are not paid with tithe money.

In his long ministry, Richards has faced some difficult situations and his response has always been the same. "More than once I've climbed a mountain at the back of my home and cried like Elijah." But then he continues quickly, "I've found one thing. The average leader of our people is a good man. He has to be a strong-headed man. It's been hard to see why some of them didn't see certain things. But I'm sure I don't see some things that I ought to see. There were some things

done to me that were unjust. And that's bound to happen. But we just learn to get along with it."

A more recent illustration of this attitude is found in the move of the Voice of Prophecy to Thousand Oaks, California, in May 1978. The staff left an adequate, debt-free, two-building complex in Glendale, California to move 45 miles away into more expensive buildings in a community where the cost of living was significantly higher. When asked to comment about the move, he decided to tell a story. "Lincoln was asked once to write an endorsement for a book a poor man was trying to sell. He agreed, and wrote the words, 'Whoever wants a book like this, well, this is just the kind of book they should have.'" Richards chuckled for a moment, then made his point with sadness, not anger. "I thought we were doing pretty well where we were. Now it costs more. We have burdens we didn't have before." Even so, Richards cooperated when the time came to move and now makes the 90-mile round-trip to the studio for recording sessions. Yet, Richards is sensitive to fault-finding. Early in the 1930s, a woman who claimed to be a prophet showed him a book critical of the church's leaders. He dismissed the book solely on the basis of its extreme criticism. "When you write a whole book just condemning people," he explained, "then that's the work of the devil."<sup>9</sup>

Richards' work has created problems for him, most noticeably, in his own family. His daughter Virginia says, "I saw his love for everyone manifested in ways that were sometimes a detriment to our family."<sup>11</sup> His wife has spent literally thousands of nights at home alone. His son, H.M.S. Richards, Jr., says, "My father never even changed a light bulb at home; my mother's the one who raised us."<sup>10</sup> Much of the time, Richards' wife functioned as the sole parent in the family.

He'd leave his family at home for many weeks at a time. He once left them in

Glendale, while he preached in Lodi, California, for 100 consecutive nights. His longest crusade was held in Fresno, California, where he preached seven nights a week for nine months. For 50 years of summers, after his radio program began, Richards would tour the campmeeting circuit, often spending as much as six weeks away from home. Frequent trips to the Middle East and elsewhere took even more time away from the family.

Richards recognized the problem and tried to overcome it. His son Kenneth recalls several occasions when the family (including Dad) went camping together. He also remembers boxing lessons, long walks, and countless discussions. But the overall picture is of a less than fulltime father and husband. His son H.M.S. Richards, Jr., was born while Richards was preaching in Alhambra, California. His youngest son Jan was born while Richards was conducting meetings in Phoenix, Arizona, just as Richards himself was born when his father was off preaching.

As a preacher and an evangelist, Richards has advice for pastors and church leaders. "The best evangelism for this church is an evangelistically minded pastor with his church behind him. A few men can do evangelism full time, but not many."

The local pastor "should get on the radio as soon as he can" for two or three minutes a day to introduce himself and his church to the community. The program should be devotional in nature. Richards would like to see the Voice of Prophecy offer radio training to interested pastors. "I'd like to see a coordinated advance in this church like we've never had yet. Suppose we could take time on every radio and television station in a city that had time available. Then let's send our papers free to every person in the city willing to receive them for a year. Then people would know we're here. If we have a man who can draw a big crowd, then let's use him. But let's not waste money by spending \$50-60,000 to get 25 to 50 people."

The ideal, says Richards, would be for a local church to combine a heavy use of the media with a two-by-two approach at the doors of the community. "Let's be open about it," he insists. "Hello, I'm a Seventh-day Adventist. I'd like to tell you about my beliefs." This would be much better than "inviting people from all over the place" to a big meeting.

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**"Did Mrs. White borrow too much? It's so much bigger than that. . . We have too much in common to be arguing over some of these details."**

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When speaking about his concerns for the future of the church, Richards mentions three items. He wishes that less denominational construction was being financed: "It looks too much like we're planning to stay for the duration." Another concern is "sloppiness" in Adventist preaching. He's like to see more attention given to historical accuracy by preachers. "The references to history that we think support our prophetic understanding should be critically evaluated. Let's use the best sources for the linking of history with prophecy."

A third concern is the current Adventist discussion about righteousness by faith. He wonders why it has been forgotten that the church held a series of "righteousness by faith schools for preachers" in 1892. Richards' own father, from the Iowa Conference, attended the seminar at the Battle Creek Tabernacle. The teachers were Uriah Smith, W.W. Prescott, A.T. Jones, E.J. Waggoner, and Ellen White. They used no textbook but the Bible. Jones taught Romans and Waggoner taught Galatians. Richards remembers his father describing the meetings as deeply spiritual and scholarly. "They left knowing the books of Romans and Galatians like the backs of their hands," he observes.

Debates in the church do not particularly worry him. "All these discussions about Ellen White have not changed me a bit.

"Here's the trouble," he continues. "None of the questions about Mrs. White can be answered simply with a yes or no. You have to see the whole picture. Too many people see only one small corner of the question, like 'Did Mrs. White borrow too much?' It's so much bigger than that. What did she say? Why did she say it? That's what we ought to be discussing. We have too much in common to be arguing over some of these details."

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#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

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1. Several sources provided many of the names, dates, places, and events mentioned in this article: *Forward in Faith*, by Roy F. Cottrell (Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1945); *The Miracle of the Microphone*, by Bill Oliphant (Southern Publishing Association, 1966); *The Story of the Voice of Prophecy*, and *The Voice of Prophecy*, (undated booklets published by the Voice of Prophecy); *H.M.S. Richards: Man Alive!* by Virginia Cason (Freedom House, 1974); "A Rhetorical Analysis of the Speaking of H.M.S. Richards in Connection with the 'Voice of Prophecy' Broadcast of the Seventh-day Adventist Church," a doctoral thesis by Wilber Alexander (Michigan State University, 1962); and *A Voice in the Air*, (Voice of Prophecy booklet, 1980) and *Hello America!* (Voice of Prophecy booklet, 1962), both by Robert E. Edwards.

2. Alexander, "Rhetorical Analysis of the Speaking of H.M.S. Richards in Connection with the

'Voice of Prophecy' Broadcast of the Seventh-day Adventist Church," p. 49.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 53.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 51.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 52.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

7. One of the attorneys related to Richards was John Forrest Curry, California Secretary of State from 1899 to 1911.

8. John Harvey Kellogg performed surgery on the mother, grandmother, and aunt of H.M.S. Richards, who remembers the doctor well. One of Kellogg's "operating nurses" was the mother of Mabel Richards.

9. Cason, *Man Alive!*, n.p.

10. H.M.S. Richards, Jr., has made this comment many times as an illustration of his father's devotion to his work.