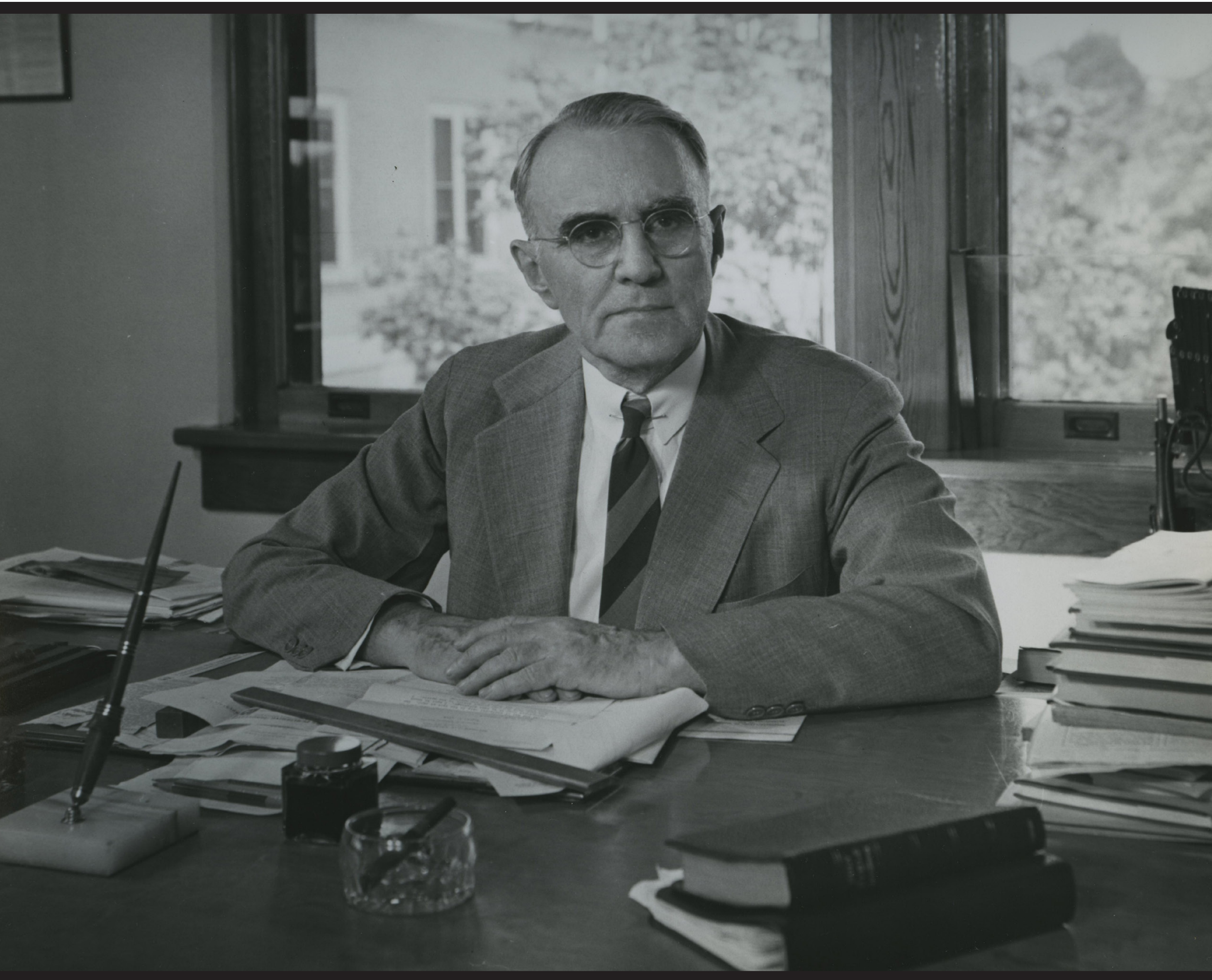


Heber Votaw, Religious Liberty director (Photo courtesy of the General Conference Archives)

KEYWORDS: Adventist history, General Conference archives, Heber and Carolyn Votaw, President Warren G. Harding, William Spicer

TALES *from the* (GC) Crypt

BY MITCHELL A. TYNER

Some time ago, I dropped by the office of David Trim, director of the General Conference Office of Archives, Statistics and Research, told him I was experiencing a bit of withdrawal and boredom after retirement, and asked if he could use some volunteer help one day a week. He jumped at the offer. The resulting experience has not been boring.

One of my assignments was to collect and catalogue the papers of a gentleman named Heber Votaw, perhaps not a familiar name to many church members, but known to me as he was one of my predecessors in what is now the Department of Public Affairs and Religious Liberty.

Heber Votaw was born in Mansfield, Ohio, on March 3, 1881. When he was seventeen years old, on October 2, 1898, he was baptized into the Seventh-day Adventist Church, of which his mother and siblings were already members. He attended Mount Vernon Academy when it was a junior college. In 1903, shortly after graduation, he married Carolyn Harding, younger sister of Warren G. Harding, of whom more later. That same year he was employed as a minister in the Ohio Conference, and was ordained just one year later.

There then occurred a seminal event in the Votaws' life; they received a letter from the General Conference, then located at 222 North Capitol Street in Washington (now in the middle of the park on the north side of the Capitol), notifying them that they were selected to be the first Adventist missionaries to Burma.[1] Married one year, a denominational employee less than a year: things apparently moved much faster in those days!

The choice of a young, partially educated, untraveled and unsophisticated pastor was not unusual. The church was sending many such young couples to major cities across the world with no instruction in missiology and no in-depth exposure to the cultures they would

enter. Like the eleven chosen by Jesus, their curriculum vitae were exceedingly short. But, like those eleven, they went out and successfully started new churches across the globe.

The Votaws followed a common pattern: they immediately started language study, and laid plans for a school, a clinic, and publishing work. All this in a hot, steamy, tropical climate that had proven hard to take for many of those accustomed to more temperate weather.

Their efforts bore fruit; soon there was a Sabbath School meeting in what passed for mission headquarters (and their residence) in Rangoon.[2] But soon they, like so many others, fell victim to the weather and tropical diseases. Carolyn had to go back home for recuperation, but Heber refused to leave his post. Eventually, it came to the point that one of Carolyn's brothers, a physician, wrote to the secretary of the General Conference and told him that if they didn't bring the Votaws home immediately, Heber would not survive.

On their return, in 1915, the Votaws moved to Takoma Park, where Heber taught religion classes at Washington Missionary College until 1917.[3]

Another of Carolyn's brothers, Warren, had been moving up politically while the Votaws were in Burma. He was a member of the Ohio Senate from 1900–1904, and then served as Lieutenant Governor of Ohio from 1904–1906. He then lost an election for Governor, and went back to Marion, Ohio, where he owned and edited the local newspaper—and remained very active and well connected in Ohio Republican circles. He was elected to the United States Senate in 1915, shortly after the Thirteenth Amendment to the US Constitution initiated popular election of senators. He served in the Senate until 1921, when he was inaugurated as the twenty-ninth president of the United States.

The geographical distance did not lessen contact between Carolyn Votaw and her upwardly mobile older brother. While in Burma, she wrote to Warren and urged him to leave politics and enter a more reputable line of work. The advice fell on deaf ears. The relationship deepened with the Votaws' move to Takoma Park. In 1918, Heber went to work for his brother-in-law, first as a clerk, later as assistant clerk for the Senate Committee on the Philippines, which Harding chaired. After becoming president, Harding appointed Heber Votaw to

Heber Votaw (Photo courtesy of the General Conference Archives)

be superintendent of the Federal Bureau of Prisons and chair of the parole board for each prison.[4]

Carolyn Votaw, during this time, served as a member of the Women's Bureau of the DC Metropolitan Police Department as a probation officer, and director of a program for unwed mothers. In 1920, she was appointed to head the social service division of the US Public Health Service, and as an advisor to the Federal Board of Vocation Education within the Veterans' Bureau, which caused her name to arise during testimony in the prosecution of the Bureau's director, Charles R. Forbes, on corruption charges.

Warren Harding died unexpectedly in San Francisco in 1923, while on a tour of the western states. Shortly before, a close aide shocked him by disclosing details of a number of instances of corruption involving his cabinet members. Whether this contributed to his sudden death is unknown.

Immediately following his death, Harding was hailed as a great president, but soon the scandals involving his staff broke. The country learned that his superintendent of veteran's affairs had looted the funds of his office and absconded to Paris. Then the Teapot Dome scandal broke, exposing Albert Fall, Harding's Secretary of the Interior, as having a central role in the illegal leasing of a naval petroleum reserve in Wyoming for considerable personal gain. Congressional investigation of the affair brought to light the involvement of Harry Daugherty, Harding's former campaign manager whom he had selected as Attorney General. Daugherty was forced from office by Harding's successor, Calvin Coolidge.

As Superintendent of Prisons, Votaw answered directly to Daugherty. As Daugherty's political enemies drew him into the congressional investigation of Teapot Dome, charges of corruption at the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary brought Heber Votaw, as prison superintendent, into the investigation. Votaw stayed on in his position for another two years, during which he was called to testify before Congress about the Atlanta penitentiary matter. He did so successfully and was cleared of any wrongdoing.

For a year following his departure from government, Votaw worked as a service manager at Washington Sanitarium.[5] Recognizing the value of his knowledge of government and contacts therein, the GC in 1926 elected Votaw associate secretary of what was then the Religious Liberty department. He served in that capacity until 1941, when he became departmental secretary—equivalent today to director. From 1941 until 1954, he also served as editor of *Liberty* magazine.

Heber Votaw apparently was a quick study. He seems to have immediately applied the knowledge he gained while working in government to the religious liberty problems brought to him in his new position. During the 1930s, these issues often had to do with helping members with immigration matters. In the early war years, he was called on to assist a recent Loma Linda medical graduate who had accepted government money and promised to serve the country as needed. He was then drafted into the military, declined to serve, and Votaw was called on to intercede. Votaw didn't waste time with sergeants—he had entrée to the offices of general staff officers and used it.

On one occasion, a member of the Capitol Hill Church in Washington called Votaw directly, complaining that as a janitor at Union Station she had not been scheduled to work on the Sabbath until the arrival of a new manager. Votaw said, "I know the Director of Union Station personally. Let me take care of this." And he did.

The geographical distance did not lessen contact between Carolyn Votaw and her upwardly mobile older brother. While in Burma, she wrote to Warren and urged him to leave politics and enter a more reputable line of work. The advice fell on deaf ears.

In 1945, Votaw was asked to assist with the repatriation of Adventist missionaries in the Philippines, one of whom was Charles Wittschiebe, a colorful character whom many of us enjoyed later as a professor at Andrews University.

Reading the reports of these and other cases, it struck me how similar the issues were to the cases I handled in the same position half a century later—Sabbath work, especially in the manufacturing and transportation industries, labor unions, literature evangelists, zoning, immigration. Some things remain constant.

Votaw lived just eight years after retiring, living in the house he and Carolyn built on Carrol Avenue in Takoma Park until his death in 1962.

When we go digging around in records of the past, we seem to find about as many questions as answers, and this exercise was no exception.

When the Votaws left Burma, they came home, like many missionaries, short on cash; witness the fact that

they had to ask the GC to advance funds for the steamship tickets to come home. The house they built in Takoma Park, just across the street from the hospital and college campus, is white columned and elegant. Where did the money come from? The answer came to me not from the files, but in a conversation with a member of the Faith and Reason Sabbath School Class at Sligo Church—Heber Bouland, now 92. Heber said that his parents lived near and were friends of the Votaws, and that was how he got the name Heber. He also said that when President Harding died, he left the Votaws $50,000, a considerable sum in those days, and they used it, at least in part, to build that home. It's now the residence of the president of Washington Adventist University, and still the nicest house in the neighborhood.

Votaw was in Washington as a federal employee during both the 1919 Bible Conference and the 1922 General Conference session when the GC president and secretary switched positions, and surely was aware of both, but no mention of either was found in his papers. Did he not have conversations with one or more delegates to either or both?

What knowledge did the Votaws have of Warren Harding's affairs? Carolyn kept close contact with her brother, and, among other functions, acted as contact person and guide for Ohioans who wanted to visit the White House. She would regularly take them into the mansion without advance notice, show them the public rooms and then introduce them to the president. On one occasion, one such visitor from home, named Nan Britten, asked for a tour. Apparently, Carolyn didn't know that the little girl with Britten was the child she claimed was fathered by Warren Harding in a White House closet, and that Britten came there to introduce the girl to her father. Oddly enough, the president was nowhere to be found that day.

As director of the Bureau of Prisons, Heber Votaw worked under the direction of the Attorney General, A. G. Daugherty, as described above. The relationship evinced in their correspondence was formal, correct, and apparently a bit distant. There is no evidence of cordiality or personal friendship. But did Votaw have any inkling of the corruption with which Daugherty (and other administration figures, including Votaw himself, as described above) was charged? In his defense, it should be stated that the president himself seems to have been genuinely surprised when, just before his death, he was made aware of the facts.

Heber Votaw apparently was a quick study. He seems to have immediately applied the knowledge he gained while working in government to the religious liberty problems brought to him in his new position.

Let me be clear: I am in no way inferring any doubt as to Votaw's honesty and rectitude. During his years in Burma, he was scrupulous in financial and other record keeping and adherence to standards and policies.

For the answers to these and other questions, I looked to the correspondence between Votaw, A. G. Daniels, and William Spicer. Along that route, some interesting bits appeared that illuminate the personality of Heber Votaw.

First, he was not one to blindly follow precedent. Most other missionaries in new territory began by working with expats and with locals who spoke English, many of whom were the children of one European parent. Votaw did this, but he also looked at the wider picture and did not want his work confined to Rangoon and the Burman people. He made contact with a member of the Karen people from northern Burma who had some previous contact with Adventism in India and came to Votaw asking for a worker to be sent to his people. After that, virtually every letter from Votaw to Spicer contained an urgent plea for a worker to be sent to the Karens.

Second, he was not afraid to differ with and even confront his organizational colleagues and superiors. In 1940, F. D. Nichol, the highly respected editor of the *Review and Herald*, wrote an article that Votaw interpreted (with good

reason) as arguing that a vegetarian diet made people more moral. Votaw took issue with this and sent Nichol a seven-page letter stating his reasons. Perhaps the most interesting is this: "I spent eleven years working among the Buddhists of Burma, virtually all of who are vegetarians, and could discern no difference in morality between them and others."

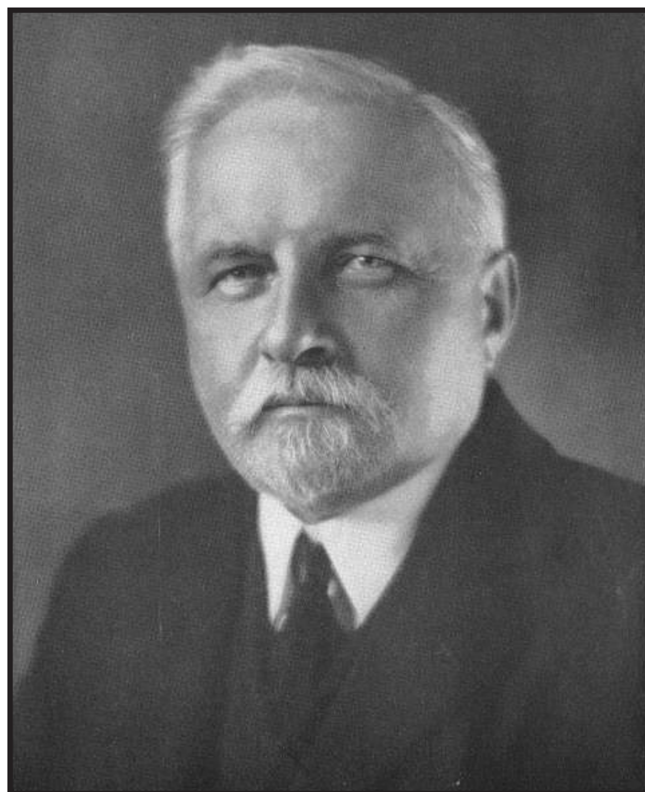
These papers also disclose interesting insights as to Spicer. On occasion, Spicer wrote of his frustration with an evangelist who had made outlandish false accusations of the Vatican. His conclusion: "Perhaps we owe the Vatican an apology."

Spicer must have been one industrious and highly organized individual. Certainly he was a master correspondent. He had far fewer workers in Secretariat than now and kept up personal correspondence with, seemingly, all overseas workers. After the 1904 reorganization, he was still understaffed, or perhaps he under-delegated. The carbon copies of his outgoing letters were kept and bound in letter-size books, typically of at least 1,000 pages, and he often filled more than one per year.

On November 25, 1914, Spicer wrote to Daniels, who was on an extended itinerary in India. They had both realized that, with the outbreak of war in Europe the previous August, transportation to bring Daniels back home for Annual Council was going to be hard to find and potentially dangerous. Spicer urged Daniels to remain in India and finish his itinerary, which he did. This may be the only occasion of an Annual Council going forward without the GC president present.

The Spicer/Daniels correspondence also touched on how the war would affect the church and its workers. One name that occurs frequently is that of L. R Conradi, whose influence in the European church was so important. In a letter of October 4, 1914, just weeks after the outbreak of World War I, Spicer wrote to Daniels concerning letters from Germany:

> The German letters are pretty full of patriotism, and I have kept them close. I do hope our brethren in the various countries in Europe will not make themselves a part of the world's conflict. Personally, I am clinging to the conviction that while many of the brethren may be swept off their feet and take part in actual conflict, others will hold steady to John's commandment to the soldiers of his day and see to it that they do violence to no man. This is a thing we cannot talk about in print or in public very freely.



William Spicer (Photo courtesy of the General Conference Archives)

Spicer's correspondence sometimes unknowingly sheds light on current discussions, such as this passage from a letter dated June 24, 1913, from Spicer to Sarah McInterfer, Ellen White's secretary and companion: "I enclose with this missionary credentials voted you by the General Conference for the ensuing quadrennial term. I also enclose ministerial credentials for Sister White. Will you kindly see that they are placed in her hands?"

Also of interest is a February 21, 1937 letter from Arthur White to H. T Elliott, in which he stated that although Mrs. White never baptized, she did perform weddings. The White Estate has a copy of this letter, in which someone has written in the margin, "Mistake."

On February 2, 1922, Spicer initiated an extended correspondence with W. C White concerning the power of the pope to change events. At issue was a statement in a revision, then underway, to *Great Controversy*. They

debated at length the facts, the best way to present them, how they would be received, etc. But interestingly, in a discussion of how to best to word a book written by Ellen White, there was no discussion of what she actually wrote!

Other incidentals gleaned along the way:

1906: R. P. Montgomery was sent as a missionary to Borneo. Decades later, in retirement, he would serve as my wife's teen-years' pastor in Cleburne, Texas.

1906: Pearl Rees, for whom the women's dormitory at Union College is named, is listed as secretary of the Atlantic Union Conference.

1907: Fordyce Detamore was sent as a missionary to Singapore.

1909: An Ohio farmer wrote to Spicer stating that he and his wife were fluent in English, Swedish, and German, and wanted to be sent as missionaries to Madagascar. Spicer, in reply, thanked them for their dedication and willingness to serve, but noted that their language skills would not be relevant in Madagascar, that the French authorities were not easing the way for Protestant missionaries, and that the denomination was giving preference to sending missionaries to locations easier to enter. He closed with what we would now interpret as "don't call us, we'll call you." After a few months, he received a letter from the farmer, now in La Paz, Bolivia, telling of the self-financed work he and his wife had established and of their intent to move on to Lake Titicaca and Peru. It was signed Fernando Stahl.

1910: Roland Loasby, a secondary-school teacher in Bermuda, wrote to Spicer about his desire for more graduate education. Thankfully, his ambition was achieved, as he became perhaps the church's greatest linguist of his time. Years later, at the Seminary, he would impress his students by selecting an important biblical word and writing it on the board, in twenty-five languages.

And throughout these years, one family name appears repeatedly: Westphal, the family so important in the growth of the church in South America. One of the members of that distinguished family did her best to teach us Spanish at what was then Southwestern Junior College.

Why was all this of interest? In a very real sense, it was like doing genealogy. My wife, Patsy, and I both come from small families and between us have only one living relative.[7] As a result, the church has been our family though the years. It has been observed that we can choose our friends, but not our families. We don't always agree with our families, we may find ourselves diametrically opposed to positions and ideas they advocate, but they are still family. That relationship is so valuable that it must be broken only under the direst circumstances. Doing genealogy may thus lead one to surprises, and not always pleasant ones, but it is always better to know the truth.

But here I found reasonable, sane, dedicated people approaching real-world problems rationally within their realm of knowledge. We, with hindsight, can see what was then the future, but they could not. All in all, I found a comforting record of people honestly giving a difficult job their best shot. Not a bad example for their successors.

Endnotes

1. Now Myanmar.
2. Now Yangon.
3. Later Columbia Union College, and now Washington Adventist University.
4. One wag has speculated that Votaw's lack of prison experience was perhaps offset by his time in an Adventist boarding academy.
5. Now Washington Adventist Hospital.
6. By all accounts, the Annual Council went forward with serious problems. Given the history of the last two such councils, this may be a precedent with consideration.
7. My mother, now 105 years old.

MITCHELL TYNER, now retired, was a pastor for ten years, a department director in the Kentucky-Tennessee Conference for seven years, during which he received his law degree, and was on staff at the General Conference for 24 years, first in Public Affairs and Religious Liberty (PARL), then in the Office of General Council (OGC).