

Finding Our Ancestors in the Archives: Wheaton, Moody and the China Connection.

by Dr. Joel Carpenter

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What a delight it is to be asked to talk with you this evening, here at one of my favorite places, one of the world's great treasure troves for the study of evangelical Christianity in modern times. As you heard, I had the privilege of working here as the director of the Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals (ISAE). It was a delight to work alongside Bob, Paul and the expert staff of the BGC Archives; the inimitable Jim Stambaugh, founding director of the BGC Museum, and Ferne Weimer, intrepid director of the BGC Library. It was for me an intellectual feast, and I consumed historic sources to my heart's content. If you know something about my book on American fundamentalism, *Revive Us Again*, or the Garland Press reprint series on fundamentalism that preceded it, this was the mother lode that I mined in order to publish them. So when Bob invited me to talk about using the archives and what that experience meant to me, I jumped at the chance. I owe this place and these people, big.

I have spent a variety of intensive episodes working the collections here, but I have time to talk about only one. It was my favorite research experience of all time, the one that afforded the most profound and intimate contact with the actors in the stories I write. So let me tell you about doing the archival research for the one chapter I authored in the book that I co-edited with Wilbert Shenk. The book is *Earthen Vessels: American Evangelicals and Foreign Missions, 1880-1980* (Eerdmans, 1990), and the chapter is "Propagating the Faith Once Delivered: The Fundamentalist Missionary Enterprise, 1920-1945." This book contains essays by historians of missions who, for the most part, first presented these chapters as papers at a conference held here at Wheaton in 1986 and sponsored by the ISAE.

To make the book cohere, however, Wilbert and I decided that it needed a few more chapters. One glaring gap was on the role of fundamentalists in missions in the aftermath of their historic fight with the liberals and moderates in the major Protestant denominations. American fundamentalism was my specialty at the time, so I decided to write the chapter. It is a long chapter, which deals with a variety of things, notably the growing tensions within the Protestant missions enterprise that were in many respects at the heart of the fundamentalist-modernist controversies of the 1920s and 1930s, the rise of an alternative missionary enterprise that fundamentalists and other conservative evangelicals created and supported, and which eventually grew to dominate American foreign missions.

But I wanted to delve deeper into the spirit of that missions movement. I wanted to know more about the people who volunteered and went out. Missionary and general religious magazines listed these candidates, gave some basic information (e.g. home town, education) and sometimes printed their testimonies, but I wanted to learn more about them. How did they experience a spiritual call to be missionaries? What kinds of spirituality did they embrace? What sorts of networking did they do? How did the missions recruit them, prepare them, and if needful, weed them out?

I set to work in the Graham Center Library, and quickly found dozens of works to help with the chapter, including a good run of *China's Millions*, the magazine of the China Inland Mission, and a variety of memoirs by CIM missionaries, including the prolific and eloquent Isobel Kuhn, a modern-day mystic who became a missionary to the Lisu people of far-western China. Today, we discover, the Lisu population has a Christian majority. CIM was growing steadily in the 1920s and 1930s, and its dynamism was one of the critical facets of the story of fundamentalist missions in the era. I quickly decided to feature CIM in my chapter.

What helped cement that decision was what I found next in the BGC Archives. In those years (1980s), Bob, Paul, and a cadre of gifted volunteers, including Wheaton students, had been conducting oral history interviews with Wheaton alumni who were retired missionaries. Bob kept telling me that I really ought to listen to some of those interviews, but being a text-trained historian, I kept holding off, thinking that written sources were more reliable. But then Bob showed me a printed transcript of one of those interviews, and I decided that there was enough in it to make it worthwhile to listen to some of the interviews.

What I found was a remarkable correlation of taped interviews with the printed sources I had just found in the library. Several of the interviewees, I discovered, had gone out from Wheaton and Moody with the China Inland Mission. Some were, in fact, part of the famous "China 200," the "200 new missionaries in two years" that CIM director D.E. Hoste said in 1929 that God had promised him. And indeed, by 1931, in the very pit of the Depression, CIM had shipped out 200 new recruits, 91 of them from North America, and six from Wheaton. Moody had eighteen of them, by the way. So here I had a rich opportunity to go behind the glowing and stylized published testimonies in the magazines and find out more about the people.

At first I was disappointed that none of these interviews were transcribed. Bob said that if he had more staff or volunteer time or some targeted funding, he might have had more transcribing, but he said that he was not sure it was worth the time and effort. While transcriptions might be more easily skimmed and searched for relevant topics, Bob conceded, they put the researcher at a disadvantage in other ways. Words on a page are a much thinner source, he said. They are like butterflies pinned into a box. Living voices, with their tones, rhythms and inflections, are much richer, he argued. Is something being said in a wry manner, with humor, or is it said in anger? Words on a page can't always convey these nuances.

No doubt you all have had the experience of sending off an e-mail that was totally misread in terms of your affect and intent, or you misread someone else's. There is no substitute for face-to-face communication. If that is so, I wondered, why not videotape the interviews? Bob said once again that the idea had been broached, but cost of production and issues of ongoing storing and handling all pointed to audio tape as the best solution at the time. And as those of you who are fans of thoughtful radio know full well, voices themselves convey great range and depth of meaning. I was actually disappointed when I saw a DVD version of the *Prairie Home Companion*. Garrison Keillor's soliloquies were diminished, I thought, rather than enhanced. "Okay, Okay, Bob," I said, "I'll try it." I came to the archives with my revolutionary new research tool, (remember, this was 1987), a Zenith portable computer, and I put on the earphones. Thankfully the archivists had prepared listening guides for the tapes, which provided two-three-word subject indexes alongside the tape running time numbers. That way, if you

couldn't do the full four-five hours of listening, you could go to the areas of the conversation that seemed the most relevant. In my case, it was invariably the interviewees' reflections on their early years, education, experience of a call, and preparation.

These conversations were enchanting. Here was Bob or Paul or a Wheaton student gently leading, with just a few questions: "What do you remember about your early childhood?" "Were your parents Christian believers?" "How did you decide to come to Wheaton?" And then you would hear a reedy, well-aged voice, male or female, opening up and sharing rich memories. I was amazed that people were so forthcoming. They spoke freely about abusive people or situations, about mystical (i.e. "charismatic") experiences, about rivalries and tensions, about the quality of education (or lack thereof) at Wheaton. Bob and Paul said that for some reason, these interviews, in a quiet, sunny room with a microphone, a cup of tea and a friendly interviewer, seemed to evoke candor. People said things that they would never put in a book. Indeed, some of them who had published memoirs were much less guarded and more forthcoming on tape than in print. Interviewees may have somewhat fuzzier memories of some details or dates or sequences of events. Whenever possible, one should check these sources over against published ones that might corroborate or clarify some facts. But the great value of these sources goes beyond mere facts. Their value lies in the way the speakers recall the character of events and episodes in their lives, both evoking them and reflecting on them.

I want to play for you a bit of the interview with Elizabeth Evans, one of the most amazing evangelical activist leaders of the twentieth century, who worked with J. Elwin Wright to pioneer first the New England Fellowship in the 1930s, then the National Association of Evangelicals in the 1940s, and then the World Evangelical Fellowship in the 1950s.

INTERVIEWER: When did you become a Christian?

EVANS: When I was four years old. I had been living in New York City. Mother had told us never to take any money from anyone. And one day, a man put a penny in my hand as he went rushing past. I had no time to run after him and tell him I couldn't take it. So, I went in to show it to my mother and before I could say anything further, she said, "Oh, you found a penny on the street. Well, what bright eyes!" I didn't know what to do or say. So, I just let it go at that. I thought she might scold me if I tell her that a man gave it to me and not really believe me that I couldn't tell him no. So I'd rather have her think that I had bright eyes. But that night I could not sleep. I thought if the Lord Jesus came tonight, my mother and father would go to heaven, my brothers and sisters, and here I'd be all alone. I could not sleep and finally I ran and woke Mother up. And I said, "Mother, I want to tell you what happened." I asked her to forgive me for telling what I said was a lie. Of course, it was not really but we had been taught that deceiving was just the same as a lie. She said, "Did you ask Jesus to forgive you?" And I said, "Why no should I?" And she said, "Yes. The Lord Jesus died on the cross because of all your naughty ways. And He took your punishment for all of that on Himself. And so, You can ask Him to forgive you, and He will." Well, I knelt down, and I asked the Lord Jesus to forgive me. I told Him the story in brief, and I seemed to have a vision, the Lord Jesus up in the corner of the room. It wasn't really a vision but, I don't know what it really was but I seemed to see Him there, and His eyes were so sad because what I had done wrong but so loving also. And it broke my heart. And I remember that I, I cried a little. But I asked Him to forgive me, and I felt so happy. I

remember jumping up and down and saying how happy I was. I've never doubted that I belonged to Him from that day to this. And I was four years old. One of my early memories. Then, when I was twelve years old, I was attending meetings where they were talking about a deeper Christian life. It was in the mission that my mother and father had out in Des Moines, Iowa. And, I remember I sometimes like to do things that I was told not to do. [laughs] I would I loved to read for one thing. And I knew up in the attic there was some funny papers. So I went up there, and I read them. My folks never had Sunday paper, and they never let us see those funnies. The Katzenjammer Kids [a daily American comic strip], for instance, were always, always getting the best of their parents, always showing them up as pretty stupid. And Father didn't feel that sort of thing was good for us. So, he never had them in the, in the home, never let us read them. But I was fascinated with them. And I remember that was one of things that I did (if I could slip away for a few minutes, two or three times) that I knew that I should not do. I told my mother about it. But I also wanted that the Lord would really help me to really want His will. And so I went forward that day at the end of that service. And I dedicated my heart and life to the Lord. And I asked Him to help me to always want and always do His will. And I think that is a very important thing many young people wouldn't have to face a different and new decision to make over and over again about this or that if they just said "Is this the will of the Lord?" And to have purpose in their heart that they would always do what they believe is the will of the Lord for them. And I, at that time, felt I wanted to be a missionary.

This is indeed, rich, fascinating material. Do come back and hear some for yourself. Would you like to hear now what I did with some of it? This passage comes from my chapter in *Earthen Vessels*, a section titled "Students and Missions: Wheaton, Moody and the China Connection, 1925-1933." It gives you a glimpse, I hope, of some of our ancestors: Wheaton and Moody students who volunteered for China 75-80 years ago, and of the ethos in which they lived.

[Dr. Carpenter then proceeded to read pages 110 to 117 of the book he co-edited with Dr. Wilbur Shenk, *Earthen Vessels: American Evangelicals and Foreign Missions, 1880-1980* published by W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company of Grand Rapids, Michigan, reproduced by permission of the publisher; all rights reserved. These pages are part of the chapter he wrote for the book, "Propagating the Faith Once Delivered: The Fundamentalist Missionary Enterprise, 1920-1945" This excerpt is used by courtesy of Eerdmans and cannot be reproduced without their permission.]

These faith missionaries [from Fundamentalist colleges and Bible schools in the 1920s and 30s] were also decidedly less countrified than their turn-of-the-century mainline missionary predecessors had been. Fully half of the CIM [China Inland Mission] recruits were from urban areas. More came from the West Coast region than any other, including twenty-three from the U.S. Pacific states and another six from British Columbia. The northeastern and Great Lakes regions of the United States added eighteen and nineteen respectively, and the next largest group was the ten whose parents were China missionaries.

Not many more clues can be drawn from the names, portraits, and the brief accompanying statements for each new missionary. Fortunately, oral histories exist for eight students from Wheaton College and the Moody Bible Institute who sailed with CIM between 1926 and 1933, and for five others from Wheaton who in those years became missionaries with other boards.

These interviews afford us a glimpse into the experiences of fundamentalist missionaries-in-the-making in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

These Moody and Wheaton recruits came from an educational environment that differed a great deal from that of the surrounding schools. By the late 1920s and early 1930s, the coeducational church-related colleges of the Midwest that had been the seedbed of missionary commitment were rapidly secularizing. The earnest calls to love and duty that had characterized the Student Volunteer Movement sounded increasingly out of place on these campuses. Nevertheless, there were still a number of northern liberal arts colleges, most of them operated by small denominations of holiness Wesleyan, "peace church," or conservative Calvinist heritage, where religiosity was still the norm and the call to missions continued to compel students.

The fundamentalists had only one college, however, that was not either just half-evolved from a Bible-school origin or still waiting for the ink to dry on its charter. That was Wheaton College. Wheaton's history to about 1900 was unexceptional for a small Midwestern college. But, probably because of its leaders' ties to Dwight L. Moody and his network, Wheaton had not become a theologically liberal or an academically and socially secularizing institution like most of its sister colleges. Indeed, the Wheaton of the 1920s and 1930s was something of a throw-back to an earlier era.

It is not surprising then, to find six Wheaton graduates among CIM's "Two Hundred" of 1929-1931. At Wheaton, the SVM chapter was still strong, and the faith-missions kind of spirituality and doctrinal proclivities were welcome. Furthermore, the ties between Wheaton and the Chicago area fundamentalist network, including that missions-training giant, the Moody Bible Institute, were old and well established. An additional source of missionary connections came from the college's 50 percent discount on tuition for missionaries' children.

Certainly these features helped make Wheaton attractive to Katharine Hastings Dodd, a daughter of Presbyterian missionaries to China; to Helen Nowack, whose parents served with CIM; and to Ruth Elliott, whose parents had been American Bible Society agents in China. These young women entered the college in the fall of 1926 where they joined Ruth's sisters Margaret and Frances, who had enrolled the year before.

Others coming in 1926 and 1927 were from less exotic circumstances but were nevertheless drawn to Wheaton by its connections throughout the fundamentalist network. For Ken Gieser of suburban Highland Park and Ruth DeVelde of Irving Park in Chicago, Wheaton was close by and a natural choice. In fact, DeVelde's father, a high school teacher in the city, had moved his family to Wheaton four years earlier to enroll his teenagers in the college's secondary academy. For Lyndon Hess of Buffalo, Ruth Mellis of St. Louis, and Vincent Crossett of Grand Island, Nebraska, the choice to attend Wheaton was shaped by recommendations of relatives, friends, or pastors who were alumni. These students, like the China recruits of the prior generation, were all from actively Protestant homes, and most had experienced conversions.

Life at Wheaton included the round of academics, daily chapel, athletics, part-time work, and social activities common to a small Midwestern college. But woven through it all was a pervasive evangelical emphasis, including prayer before each class and social event, Tuesday

evening all-campus prayer meetings, Sunday evening Christian Endeavor, weekly dorm-floor prayer meetings, annual evangelistic services, missionary-band prayer meetings, Bible-study groups, and Student Volunteers meetings. All of the extracurricular religious activities (except chapel) were voluntary, and most were student organized. So were the various "gospel teams" and musical groups, such as a vocal trio formed by the Elliott sisters, and the S.D.S. (Scripture Distribution Society) chapter. These groups went out to area churches, rescue missions, youth homes, hospitals, campuses, and jails. In sum, Wheaton College offered religious activities that were virtually identical to those featured at the Bible schools.

In the 1920s and early 1930s, Wheaton College had a strong, if not overpowering, missions emphasis. The Student Volunteers had twenty to thirty people at its meeting each week, and it sponsored campus visits from missions leaders such as Robert Hall Glover of the China Inland Mission. The various missions prayer bands hosted speakers from their respective fields of interest, and missionaries frequently spoke in chapel. There were also people like Mrs. Shapleigh, the dean of women, who personally encouraged her charges to consider becoming missionaries.

Unlike Bible school students, Wheaton students did not all enroll with a prior commitment to "full-time Christian service." Those who were missionaries' children, however, had been constantly confronted with the option, if not the expectation, of returning to the field. Katharine Hastings Dodd made a decision to be a missionary as a young child. She remembered what had prompted it: her father used to haul out his watch and tell her that every time it ticked, a Chinese person went to "a Christless grave."

Helen Nowack had no such clear-cut decision, she seemed to let others' expectations lead her. She had always thought that she might become a missionary, but she was apparently not very active in mission groups at Wheaton. After graduating she spent two terms at Moody with her sister Esther. Another sister, Ruth, had already joined CIM. When Esther answered CIM's call for the Two Hundred, Helen hedged. Perhaps what she really wanted was to be a secretary. But she was a stranded missionary kid with no money and nowhere to go. With some encouragement, she applied to CIM: "just as a matter of course; I thought that it was the thing to do. . . ." After all, China was more home than America, the CIM was family, and missionary life was virtually all that she had known. "They have taken good care of me," she mused, some fifty years later. For the others, of course, the "mission field" was not home. Yet for Ruth DeVelde and Lyndon Hess, who became engaged at Wheaton, it was familiar nonetheless. Both of them were raised among the intensely missionary-minded Plymouth Brethren. Their decision to go to Northern Rhodesia to teach in a mission school was shaped not only by a missionary speaker on campus, but by Ruth's extended correspondence with an old missionary friend.⁵² Neither Vincent Crossett nor Ken Gieser had thought much about being a missionary before coming to college, but that vocation was high on the list of options for 'full-time Christian service' that they had learned from their home churches and young people's fellowships. Their promptings toward foreign service came especially when they encountered missionary speakers in Wheaton's chapel services.

Margaret Elliott became a candidate with the China Inland Mission almost immediately after her graduation from Wheaton in 1929, as did her sister Ruth in 1930. Both had attended BIOLA

before coming to Wheaton, and they felt fully schooled for their vocation. Some of their friends, however, saw the need for some practical missions training and had some time on their hands while they were applying to the missions. So Helen Nowack, Katharine Hastings Dodd, and apparently some others from Wheaton enrolled in the Moody Bible Institute after their graduation in 1930. According to Ruth Elliott, these Wheaton students had been drawn into the Moody orbit by the monthly CIM prayer meetings in Chicago hosted by Mr. and Mrs. Isaac Page.

The Pages, like the Saunderses at BIOLA, were Canadians who had served in China. After returning for health-related reasons, they were reassigned to Chicago as the CIM's Midwest area representatives. Soon the jolly, lovable "Daddy" Page had a regular contingent of Moody students coming to his home on Monday nights. Jennie Kingston, a Moody student who eventually sailed with CIM, told how important the Pages had been to Moody's China Prayer Band in the mid-1920s. The Pages radiated spirituality and good cheer; they often entertained the group socially after the meetings. Mr. Page loved to tell stories and read passages from his favorite books.

These times were as important to Mr. Page and the mission as to the students. Page could get to know potential candidates and begin an informal orientation and screening process. He encouraged his protégés but gave them frank advice as well. He stressed the importance of their call to China and urged them to allow nothing to distract them, especially the prospect of marriage. Page watched the students very carefully in this regard, but as one said, "he was so nice about it that no one resented it." Nevertheless, romances regularly grew out of the group, and according to Jennie Kingston, the Pages' Monday night meetings in the mid-1920s developed into something of a "China Clique," to which the young men were sure to follow the young ladies who frequently attended.

When Katharine Hastings Dodd, Helen Nowack, and three or four other Wheaton graduates arrived at Moody in 1930, the China prayer meetings with the Pages were still going strong with thirty or forty in attendance, and they included such earnest young China volunteers as Betty Scott, the daughter of Presbyterian missionaries in China; John Stam, her future husband, was the son of a rescue-mission superintendent in Paterson, New Jersey; and Otto Schoerner, a young businessman from Butler, Pennsylvania, who would marry Katharine Hastings Dodd in China.

By entering into this fellowship with the Pages, these young people were nearing the inner circle of what is probably best described as a Protestant religious order. Some had been on or near the inside already, having been the children of CIM missionaries. For others, the relationship had been that of admiring supporters who had befriended CIM workers, faithfully read China's Millions, and upheld the mission's staff with friendship, prayer, and money. Others had been introduced to the CIM by biographies of Hudson Taylor and were impressed by his principle of living by faith. Said Otto Schoerner, "it was the inspiration of my life." Jennie Kingston was awestruck by the prospects of joining the agency of such legendary spiritual giants. She mused, "I don't know how they ever let me in."

It wasn't easy to get in. The first point of personal contact might be a conversation with Mr. Page, or perhaps with Mr. Hackman of the Institute, or with the North American director, Robert H. Glover, during one of his frequent speaking trips to the area. If the inquirer was encouraged to apply, he or she would fill out an application that asked for a spiritual autobiography, a doctrinal statement, a sense of one's calling to a particular area of work, and the like. One was asked to provide three references, and each of them was also asked to provide three references; so the mission could investigate one's background and character very deeply if any question arose. It was a daunting screening process, recalled Vincent Crossett.

If an application was approved, the candidate would be invited to spend some time at one of the mission homes in Toronto or Philadelphia. There the novices underwent a month to six weeks of study, prayer, and scrutiny under the direction of returned missionaries and the mission officials. The candidates were introduced to the history, principles, and work of the CIM, taught the rudiments of the Chinese language, and given time to "get acquainted." It was crucial for the mission to see whether the candidates would fit into the tight-knit community they were seeking to enter. At the end of this period, if the candidates still felt the call, got along with the others, and showed promise of being able to learn Chinese, they were each interviewed by the North American Council, which voted whether or not to accept them. As soon as their support was in place, the new missionaries assembled their outfits and were put on a train for Vancouver and then a steamer to Shanghai.

Thus began a life of trust, self-denial, and obedience, not only in relation to God, but also to the hierarchy within the mission. No doubt the faith missionaries serving with smaller or more recently organized societies experienced less procedural formality, but the principles were largely the same. These were paternally led religious orders, which had a camaraderie and ethos all their own.

So there's a piece of missionary social history for you. These things happened long ago, but not so far away, on the very campus where you have walked today. The people seem different and a little distant, but it is not difficult to see familiar things as well. The same is true of the institutions. Wheaton College today is quite different from what it was in 1930, even though it has remained physically centered on Blanchard Hall, and it retains a passionate attachment to its motto, "For Christ and His Kingdom." Both Wheaton College, and the people who animate it, young and old, are what they have become. They are, in that sense, determined by their history. In spite of the great American conceit to the contrary, we cannot reinvent ourselves. What we can do is respond to the situations into which we have been placed, with all the legacies of outlook, interest and predispositions that we have been given. And we can do that as faithful servants, eager to do God's will. We know that this is not the first time that the people and agencies represented here have encountered the questions of what God would have them do. They can't answer our questions for us in our time, but we can be both sobered and inspired as we see—or hear—how they responded. History is good for that. And these archives are rich with the stuff of history. Do take advantage of the opportunity you have to learn and grow wiser, here in this place, by listening to some wise people, your ancestors.