

## AMERICAN NEGRO EVANGELISM

GOD moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform," wrote Cowper. And in nothing has the saying more pertinent application than in the case of the American Negro and his evangelization. America in the centuries of discovery had a native population, which, however, at least north of the Rio Grande, was displaced by two alien races, one a European, the other an African. The European came of his own volition; the African, against his will. But both have thrived while the American Indian has diminished. One tenth of the population of the United States is Negro in some degree; and as Booker T. Washington remarked, "Negro blood is the strongest blood in the world: one drop in a white man's veins makes him a Negro."

The crude social conscience and economic vision of the seventeenth century approved of slavery, and thereby upset the balance of the world, whose Creator not only "made of one blood all nations of men," but "determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation." The Englishmen who purchased of the Dutch trader at Jamestown, a year before the *Mayflower's* landfall, nineteen Negro men and women, understood not at all either the immorality of their social ethics or the grave political problems of which their act was the seed. Two hundred years of the African slave trade, with domestic multiplication, planted in the United States over four million black slaves; and when emancipation came with the Civil War, the Negro had stamped his ineffaceable mark upon the economy and the society of America. Eighty succeeding years, though they have seen great progress in the education and accomplishments of the Negro in America, have in some areas increased rather than lessened the racial tension, and created in America an issue which has global repercussions.

One of the unique missionary enterprises operating in the Mississippi River States was the boat *The Morning Star*, an idea conceived by James Edson White. The worship room (top) and the living room of the crew (bottom) are shown.

Yet, notwithstanding all the evils of slavery, its unrequited labor, its brutal punishments, its violation of family relations and rights, its insult and injury to inherent human dignities, God turned its plague to a profit, its bane to a blessing. One of the noblest of Negro leaders has said: "When we rid ourselves of prejudice, or racial feeling, and look facts in the face, we must acknowledge that, notwithstanding the cruelty and moral wrong of slavery, the ten million Negroes inhabiting this country, who themselves or whose ancestors went through the school of American slavery, are in a stronger and more hopeful condition, materially, intellectually, morally, and religiously, than is true of an equal number of black people in any other portion of the globe."<sup>1</sup>

No thanks to slavery. But servitude required transportation, and thus the New World received its great quota of Africans, and they received an introduction to transplanted European civilization. From no favorable viewpoint did they see it, true; they were made the trodden floor, and their vision of the temple of Christian America was taken prone and suffering. Yet there were ameliorating conditions. Many slave owners were humane, some were sincere Christians. Individual servants (the cultured Southerner never used the term *slave*) were favored, taught, converted. Some made their mark, not alone upon their people, but upon the white public. And, despite the untoward conditions, the evangelization of the slave was effected by noblehearted Christian men.

The conscience of Christian America marched forward, with many a slip and many a halt, it is true, branded and shackled by cupidity, scorn, and indifference; but emancipation came at last, and with it a tremendous work of educating the freedman. In this work various agencies participated, the American Missionary Society, started by the Congregational Church but becoming nondenominational, being the foremost; and some independent enterprises were begun which had great influence, such as General Samuel C. Armstrong's Hampton Institute, in Virginia. Out of this coeducational,

industrial-training school grew great results, not least of which was Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute in Alabama.

Seventh-day Adventist efforts for the Negro at the close of the Civil War were small and unintegrated. Mrs. Van Slyke in Missouri and Joseph Clarke and his wife in Texas were the only teachers for the freedmen of whom we have record. When J. S. Killen, of Georgia, received the Adventist faith in 1878, some of his servants came with him; and one of them, Edmund Killen, already a preacher, proclaimed the message among his people, resulting in a number of adherents. But though there was an interest among Seventh-day Adventists, resources were small, experience was less, and initiative not great. In 1892 the superintendent of the Southern field, R. M. Kilgore, reported that there were no more than fifty colored Sabbathkeepers in the South. He pleaded for schools and for workers. The General Conference went so far as to recommend that "local schools for . . . colored students be established at such places in the South, and on such a plan, as may be deemed best by the General Conference Committee after careful investigation of all the circumstances."<sup>2</sup> They also appointed a special agent, Henry S. Shaw, to superintend and foster the work among the colored people.<sup>3</sup> Shaw, though a white man, was so dark that he sometimes passed as one of those who had a drop of "the strongest blood" in his veins. He was earnest, consecrated, and cheerful; and the upward swing in the Adventist Negro work was in no small part due to his labors. At the beginning of his superintendency there was one colored minister, C. M. Kinney,<sup>4</sup> and two licentiates, A. Barry and T. B. Buckner, both of whom were soon ordained.

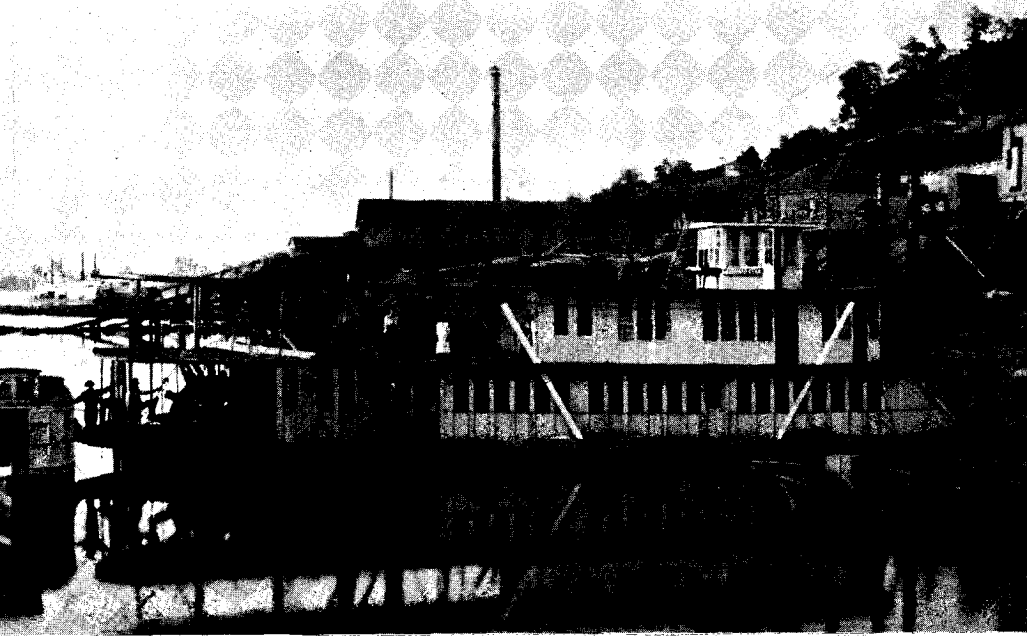
In the course of the next three years a start in education was made, by establishing a school on a farm near Huntsville, Alabama; but the inauguration of elementary schools for the education of children and of illiterate adults was due to quite another enterprise. The voice of Ellen G. White had been raised before in behalf of the Negro people and their right to

receive the benefits of the last gospel message, in health, in social betterment, in education, in the hope and joy of the Advent message. Her manuscript testimonies, however, at first received scant notice. They were brought to the fore, and published in a booklet named *The Southern Work*, by the awakened attention and energies of her older son, James Edson White.

The two surviving sons of James and Ellen White, Edson and William, exhibited diverse traits of character plainly derived from father and mother. William, the younger, was like his mother, constant, enterprising but cautious, a solid and careful builder. Edson, the older, had much of his father's enterprise and drive, and an overamount of his eccentricity. James White was saved from serious ill consequences of his enthusiasms both by his own balance of qualities and by his wife's counsel, but his son had not the same good fortune. He was resourceful, energetic, inventive, and he had a good deal of executive ability; but he was sometimes flighty and erratic. He built considerable businesses at different times, chiefly publishing enterprises, but they were liable to explode.

In 1893 James Edson White was in private business in Chicago, and his spiritual state was low. His mother was in Australia, but her letters spoke to his heart. He began again to seek God, and the Lord answered his seeking with a new revelation of His grace. He determined that he must resume work for Christ. He went to Battle Creek, and receiving permission to search for hidden treasure, he was rummaging in the attic of the General Conference when a soiled copy of the manuscript testimonies on the colored work attracted his attention. He took it with him, read and studied it night and day, and soon was fired with the determination to enter the field thus portrayed and which was practically unoccupied.

Characteristically he contrived a way which did not appeal to his sober-minded brethren, but which, with the force of his enthusiasm, was carried through to great success. He had for two or three years been steamboating on the upper Mississippi,



**The Mississippi River boat *The Morning Star*. It housed a home for workers, a chapel, and a printshop.**

and had become a pilot and captain on the Father of Waters. Now he proposed to build a river boat on the little Kalamazoo, at Allegan, pilot it down the river, across Lake Michigan, through the Chicago Canal and the Illinois River to the Mississippi, and so on down to the Deep South. And he did.

The boat was seventy-two feet long, with a hull twelve feet wide at the bottom, and cabin space under the deck, over which was stretched an awning, which provided an outdoor meeting place. He proposed to use this boat as a home for the workers, a chapel for the converts, a printing establishment, and various other enterprises. It was named the *Morning Star*.

The *Morning Star* was brought stage by stage to the lower Mississippi, and anchored off Vicksburg. Its mission was surprisingly and successfully financed by one of White's shoe-string projects—a simple little book he wrote, *The Gospel Primer*, with the primary object of having something Biblical

with which to teach illiterate Negroes to read, but with the secondary purpose, which soon came to fill the horizon, of furnishing money to the mission. Half of its twenty-five-cent price went to the colporteur, the rest to the printer and the mission. Enthusiastically taken up by thousands of church members, the *Primer* sold by the million. Later other books were written and sold, climaxed by *The Coming King*, which for many years led all subscription books on the Second Advent.

Volunteers made up the company of workers, from White's first partner, a businessman named W. O. Palmer, to successive groups of canvassers, teachers, nurses, mechanics, who accrued on the trip from Michigan through Illinois, past Tennessee, down to Mississippi, and later were recruited from all over the United States. Among these were his wife, Mrs. Emma White, Miss M. M. Osborne, Fred Halladay, Dr. Kynett, the nurses Lydia Kynett and Ida Wekel, E. W. Carey, L. A. Hansen and wife, F. W. Rogers and wife, Vincent Crawford and wife, and scores of others.

The mission was privately launched and privately supported; it was not a conference project. But the interest of the Adventist public was thoroughly enlisted. Mrs. White's supporting messages were partly responsible for this, and also not a little, J. E. White's fertile publicity methods. His *Gospel Herald*, a monthly paper telling the gospel story in simple style, but not forgetting to mention its sponsors' work or its supporters' generosity, was an Arnold von Winkelried that opened the way through opposing spears to a great missionary and publishing work in the South. It died, but through the gap poured in succession *The Southern Watchman*, *The Watchman Magazine*, *Our Times*, *The Message Magazine*.

White's initial expedition was, indeed, as it seemed to the Battle Creek critics, a quixotic enterprise; and it is doubtful that any other combination of qualities than those in Edson White could ever have carried it through to success. A boat indeed! an ark to carry a band of innocent visionaries into the

maw of the Yankee-hating South! None of them had any experience in the work for the Negro, or in meeting the deep-seated grim convictions of the Southerner about white supremacy. And to go into the very blackest part of the Black Belt, the Yazoo Valley, where the Negro outnumbered the White twenty to one and in some places one hundred to one, where the white rider kept a tight rein, a ready whip, and an itching spur on his dusky steed!

But the challenge brought into play the viking qualities of James Edson White. Whether at the helm of his boat or building schoolhouses, whether dealing with officials or placating white planters and vengeful blacks, or organizing industries and teaching humble and eager learners, he rode the crest of the waves, and always came to safe harbor.<sup>5</sup> Sometimes choleric, again the soul of diplomacy; sometimes the eloquent preacher, and then the skillful river captain snatching the refugees from the levees and housetops in the raging flood, alternately planning great enterprises and pinching the toes of his socks for pennies to pay the bills, James Edson White was the challenger to Christian adventure and the despair of conventional workers. Except for the encouraging messages from his mother in the far antipodes, which on the one hand fended off his critics and on the other lifted up his soul in God, he must time and again have sunk in despair. But it was given to him, this impulsive, generous-souled, erratic adventurer in the work of God, to plant a standard and to rally round it an increasing company of crusaders for the work among the Negroes, where the timid attempts of preceding decades had dismally failed.

The work in Vicksburg was begun by visiting Sunday schools and churches, in one of which two white women missionaries who afterward joined their ranks, had preceded them. Then, as the *Morning Star* deck became a familiar meeting place, and the Sabbath began to gather adherents, night schools were started to teach the illiterate; a chapel was erected in the city, with a charming reading room of unbelievable hominess that made a model for their own cabins. Soon the work extended

up the Yazoo River, and branch stations were established at various points.

Chief means used were the school, the literature work, the teaching of health habits and of industries. As fast as colored believers could be trained, they were turned into pastors and teachers. The aim was to man Negro schools with Negro teachers, but the demands so outgrew the supply that in a number of cases white teachers from the North were employed. These sometimes, by the chemical combination of their carbide enthusiasm with the waters of Southern passion, produced flames that make great reading now, but at the time were far from comfortable. Nevertheless, the work grew, until ten years after the initial effort there were nearly fifty small schools in six States, and the establishment of higher schools for the advancing students had been effected.

The work that began with the *Morning Star* eventuated in the formation of the Southern Missionary Society, which conducted schools, carried on evangelistic work, taught principles of health, provided charities, and did publishing work. The headquarters were moved to Nashville, where a printing establishment of some size was begun, later to be turned over to the conference and to become the Southern Publishing Association. The work of J. E. White in the South continued for some years after his mother's return from Australia, and her visits to the South were stimulating and encouraging. When for age Edson White had to retire, and turned over the assets and properties of the society to the conference, he could behold the Negro work established on a sound basis and with a growing development.

Meanwhile there was progress in other quarters and by other men. H. S. Shaw, appointed by the General Conference to superintend the Negro work, was a resourceful man, and energetic. Beginning at the Ohio River, he worked Southward to encourage and build. And he did not disdain to work with his hands as well as with his eloquent tongue. For several months he worked with the *Morning Star* enterprise in Mississippi, and



he helped establish their schools beginning to dot the adjoining territory.

M. C. Sturdevant began here in the South his work for the Negro which he so magnificently carried on, later, in the heart of Africa. There were developing also Negro ministers, some of whom have already been named. Some of the Negro teachers early trained by the Southern Missionary Society not only carried on the educational work successfully but became pastors and evangelists. Among these were Thomas Murphy, Frank Bryant, M. C. Strachan, Franklin Warnick.

One of the most vigorous and successful of workers was Anna Knight, of Mississippi, who received knowledge of the Adventist faith while still a girl, through correspondence and literature. Over great obstacles she obtained an education, including nurse's training, and opened a school in her home community, which she left in the hands of a younger sister when she was called as a missionary to India. Returning after some years, when a hostile element had burned down the school, she rebuilt and re-established it, meeting the opposition with Christian fortitude. This work was finally aligned with the Southern Missionary Society's work, and she went on to wider activities.

A more advanced educational work was done under the wing of the General Conference. Stirred to action by the appeals of Ellen G. White and the developing work of J. E. White, these Southern workers took steps to establish a training school for colored workers in the heart of the South. Taking lessons not only from the educational principles enunciated by Mrs. White but from the examples of certain Negro schools under other missionary agencies, the General Conference planned this school to be agricultural and industrial as well as normal and theological.

An estate was purchased in 1895 in the north of Alabama, near the city of Huntsville. It was an old plantation, the land worn out, the buildings falling to pieces. S. M. Jacobs, of Iowa, came with his family to open the work. Two students arrived



on the first day, one from Vicksburg, the other from Birmingham. The president of the General Conference, O. A. Olsen, and the superintendent of the district, George A. Irwin, put on their overalls and worked with the others for a token week of interest.

The first need was a supply of water. The old well was choked full of debris, and was rumored, furthermore, to be the burial place of a Yankee cavalryman. At first they hauled water from a spring on the hill. Then they set up a windmill over a well in the field; but two hours' pumping ran it dry. Then they set to work to clear the old well by the house. For two days they dug down through seventeen feet of mud mixed with knives, pitchforks, clevises, plow points, rocks, and what not. The only evidence of the Yankee cavalryman was a spur that appeared on the second day, an object that induced the telling of the story, whereupon the two students declared they would never go down into that well again. Somebody else finished the job.

Gradually the place was reduced to order, the barren fields were restored by cover crops and the little fertilizer the place could produce. And three years after first treatment, one ten-acre field gave a harvest of 270 bushels of wheat. A triumph! A scientific program of crop rotation and use of legumes built up the farm finally to a record of fertility.

The good will of the neighbors was cultivated. There was some prejudice among white farmers, but unexpected cooperation from the school in their farm needs made friends, and the school's reputation in country and town grew. One neighbor had indulged in some very harsh criticism. Then his barn burned, with all his work animals and his tools. Mr. Jacobs loaded up five or six cultivators, took his younger son and some students over, and said to the man, "We have come to plow your corn."

The man looked hard at him. "Is that the kind of man you are?" he asked.

"Yes, that's the kind of man I am. Why not?"

**The first training school for Negro workers was established in 1895 at Huntsville, Alabama, known later as Oakwood College. The top panel shows the original buildings, and the bottom panel a corner of the printshop, one of its several industries.**

"Well, if that's the kind of man you are, I've got something to do. Mr. Jacobs, I've said some mighty hard things against you for starting that school. Now I ask you to forgive me for all I've said."

"Why, I had forgiven you long ago," said Jacobs. "If not, I wouldn't have come over here."

Out into the field they went. "Now, boys," said their leader, "if you've ever done an honest day's work, do one today." And they did. Noon came, and Jacobs told the boys to get their lunches from the wagon.

"No, sir," said the man. "My wife is getting dinner, and you shall eat at my house." That day not only the field was cultivated but the heart of a neighbor was also. The next day they went over to Byrd Terry's, a colored brother, and helped him with his wheat; and the twin reports of these acts of Christian grace to white and black alike went arm in arm about the country.

The schoolwork that first summer was given in night classes, conducted by the two older Jacobs children, Clara and Lewin. About twenty were in attendance the first year. Year by year the school advanced, however, new buildings being added and new work conducted. The program has been maintained of combined agricultural and industrial work with classroom study, and Oakwood College stands today a school with a fine record of students trained for various branches of the work, some in America and some in foreign fields.

The five to seven years that filled in the last end of the century saw a good beginning in the Negro work in America, which made the foundation for the later great advancement in the half century since that time, in the prime home mission.

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<sup>1</sup> Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery*, p. 16.

<sup>2</sup> *Seventh-day Adventist Year Book* (1893), p. 62.

<sup>3</sup> *General Conference Bulletin*, vol. 5, no. 13, Feb. 21, 1893, pp. 311, 312.

<sup>4</sup> See Appendix.

<sup>5</sup> See Appendix.