

Rhoda E. Lee, Missionary Enthusiast

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The somewhat dramatic official beginnings of Brethren in Christ foreign mission efforts are reflected in the following entry on the first page of the Minutes of the Board of Foreign Missions of the Brethern [sic] in Christ Church, 1894-1921.

The first Foreign Missionary action of the Church of the Brethern [sic] in Christ in Gen. Conf. was in 1894 when held in the Bethel Church in Dickinson Co. Kansas, on Friday of the 18th day of May, last day of said Conf., when Eld. J. E. Stauffer placed five dollars on the table as a nucleus to foreign mission work.

This demanded an action on the part of Conf., and resulted in the appointment of the above named J. E. Stauffer as Foreign Missionary Treasurer.

By the close of Conf. Thirty five dollars were in the treasury.<sup>1</sup>

The minutes of Conference for the day in which the events mentioned occurred record the following action: "On motion it was decided to organize a Foreign Mission Fund, and appoint a treasurer. Brother Jacob E. Stauffer, of Newton, Harvey county, Kansas, was duly appointed."<sup>2</sup>

Today there is little denominational awareness that the launching of Brethren in Christ foreign missions was due, in no small measure, to the influence of a remarkable woman, Rhoda E. Lee. Our earliest glimpse of her career is contributed by an unsigned manuscript found by Mrs. Hannah Foote in the J. K. Forney file of the Evangelical Visitor as donated to Upland College. This manuscript, although not correct in certain details which can be verified from other sources, strongly suggests eyewitness relationship to the period of which it speaks. The present writer is inclined to the view that Mr. Forney was himself the author. Positive proof of this is lacking, but we do know that John K. Forney was a missionary enthusiast in his own right. While living in Abilene, Kansas, in 1898, he suddenly announced that he would leave his business and act upon a call to foreign mission service, which had come to him four years earlier.<sup>3</sup> This dating of his call places it in 1894, the year when the first foreign mission action was taken by the General Conference. Whether Mr. Forney's call was a direct result of what happened in Conference, we cannot say, but, in any case, he followed through and went to India, probably " . . . under the auspices of the C. M. A. [Christian Missionary Alliance?]"<sup>4</sup>

Since the manuscript in question is of considerable interest apart from its reference to Rhoda E. Lee, it is reproduced below verbatim.

"The Hidden Minister."

A Mr. Nathan In illustrating his subject he told of a young swede who was converted in one of Moody's meetings in Chicago. After his conversion the swede came to Moody wanting to know wheat he could do for Jesus. Moody looked the young man over, for he was awkward and illiterate, Finally Moody said, "How would you like to be a sandwich?" "Anything, anything for Jesus" said the

young man not knowing what he meant. It was arranged that he should report the next day for duty. The young swede reported at the appointed time; they placed two boards strapped together on his shoulders. On one side was printed John 3:16, on the other side an advertisement of the meeting then being held. "Now," said Moody, "you must walk up and down in these streets for Jesus and advertise the meetings" and the swede went off smiling, happy that he could do something for Jesus, the one who saved him. As he walked down Clark Street with the boys throwing stones and mud at the board, a traveling [man] saw him and stopped to read the sign and watch the happy swede. The result was that the traveling man attended the meeting that night and was converted. This traveling man had a splendid voice, and after his conversion, made it a rule to sing in missions of the cities which he visited in his travels. One night he was in the Bowery Mission, New York. Singing the Gospel. Presently he saw a young Jew come in and take a seat in the audience. Attracted by the singing he had entered the hall, not knowing the character of the meeting. When he heard them [speak] about Jesus, the Jew became restless, for he had been taught to hate that name. The traveling man was watching him, and when finally the Jew started for the door, he was there to meet him. He led him into an adjoining room, and spoke to him personally about Jesus as his Messiah and Savior. The result was that the Jew ultimately accepted Christ and found Salvation. In closing Mr Nathan said, "The young swede is in an unknown grave in Chicago; the traveling man to, has gone to his reward; But I am that Jew, and now am a missionary in Africa winning souls for Jesus. When we all stand before Him to receive our rewards according to our service, shall I receive all the reward for souls of men in Africa? How about the traveling man who led me to accept Christ? How about the swede who did what he could for Jesus? Will not he receive his full reward because of his faithfulness? "Every one of us (Christians) shall give account of [himself?] to God (Rom. 14:12. This same Jew Mr Albert [I?] Nathan came to Abilene Kansas in 1893, and preached in the Worlds Gospel Union Mission also on the streets in Abilene open air service, and those sermons took root in the younger Christian people and started a missionary interest and soon some young men and women started across the seas in the work.

This Jews preaching started Sister Rhoda E Lee to write a article on foreign mission and read that letter at the Brethren in Christ Conference held at the Bethel Church in Dickinson County Kansas in May 1894. See Evangelical Visitor June 1, 1894 Pages 162 and 168. There the first money was given for foreign mission work. Rev. Jacob Stauffer got under such strong conviction and walked forward to the conference table and laid down a five dollar bill, saying that is to start a fund to carry the Gospel to the heathen. Than Sister Lee took a hat and passed it through the

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- \* In order to facilitate future citation of past issues of Notes and Queries, the principle of volume paging is hereby introduced and made retroactive to the first issue of the paper. Persons preserving files are encouraged to page all previous issues as follows:
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audience and the Rev Jacob H Eshelman put the first five dollar bill in the hat. The conference members and others were like spell bound and no one had any remarks to make. The conference minutes are silent on those facts or transaction. Verbally Rev Jacob Stauffer was entrusted with the funds no statement was made how much it was the writer recollection is that it was some Forty three dollars. Than in 1895, the report of the Treasurer of the foreign mission fund was submitted and approved, not stating any amount, but by memory it was near the one hundred dollar mark. Than in 1896 the report of Rev Jacob E Stauffer Treasurer of the foreign fund was submitted and approved the amount in the Treasury was \$410.60. This converted Jew Rev Nathan and Family sailed for Africa leaving New York Dec 16 1894. and with him sailed sister Hettie Furnbaugh a member of the Brethren in Christ, and being the first one to cross the ocean in the mission interest see Evangelical Visitor Jan 1st 1895, Page 8 also letter April 29, 1895 Visitor June 1, 1895 Page 166 and letter May 3, 1895 Visitor June 15, 1895 Page 182. Free will offerings came in to defray her expenses from her friends she had considerable opposition of her going. and the last question put to her was, "is there any provision made for you to return home if you dont like it in Africa. her answer was "that is the least of my thoughts I am not looking for a return ticket that has not entered in my mind. How far may we trace some events started by the Hidden Ministers. Than in 1897, the first missionary group from the Brethren in Christ sailed from New York on the Majestic steamer.<sup>5</sup>

There is something delightfully unconventional about the picture of "Sister Lee" spontaneously passing a foreign mission collection hat through the General Conference audience. No wonder "The conference members and others were like spell bound"!

The mission article which Mrs. Lee wrote, under the inspiration of Mr. Albert Nathan's preaching, and which she read before the Conference body, appears in the Evangelical Visitor under the title, "An Appeal for Foreign Missions." We may wonder how a woman gained this access to Conference, and we note with surprise that she made her presentation methodically in the form of "a paper." Space does not permit the full reproduction of that paper here, but the following excerpts illustrate its statistical approach and its impassioned earnestness:

I wish, by the help of God, to place before our minds, to-day, a few facts concerning our obligations as stewards of God to obey our Master's command to preach the gospel to every creature.

Let us consider, (1) The condition and needs of the heathen, as they existed in Bible times and as they are now, and (2) The Gospel call, and in connection with this some of the responses made in Bible times and that are being made now.

Let us each, with the heart-cry, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" note the magic and imperative words, themselves an answer: Look, Pray, Send, Go.

. . .

I find that in China, the last fifty years, 30,000 converts have been born into the kingdom of God, but along side of that 15,000,000 have been added to heathenism by natural birth. In

spite of the triumphs of the Gospel, the heathen conquests have outstripped the Christian seventy to one.

. . . .

Africa contains one-fourth of the world's area; it has 200,000,000 of people and 600 languages, the Bible not translated into 75 of them. The Soudan alone is 4000 miles long by 1000 wide; it has 99,000,000 people and 100 languages. The most neglected part of the earth! Oh are there not some of us here to-day who will exclaim in the language of the great apostle, "Yea so have I strived to preach the Gospel, not where Christ was named, lest I should build upon another man's foundation?"

. . . .

Let us not hold our lives dear to ourselves, but present out bodies a "living sacrifice," not seeking our own profit, but the "profit of many that they may be saved." For "if we have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to our trust the true riches?"

. . . .

What are our watchmen doing? The Macedonian cry has been sounding down through the ages, and is ringing in our ears to-day, and the same call comes to you and me that came to Isaiah. Hearken a minute, watchmen. "The land is desolate because no man layeth it to heart." "Come over and help us." "Whom can I send, and who will go?" How can they go unless they are sent?

Oh may I dare to hope that a missionary fund may be started and a systematic method of foreign work be organized, and that each of us will practice economy and self-denial to swell the fund? "The King's business requires haste," and may God speed the time when I "hear a rumor from the Lord that an ambassador is sent among the heathen."<sup>6</sup>

A few months after the Conference at which the above paper was read Mrs. Lee wrote an article entitled, "Home and Foreign Missions." After observing that there had been debate pro and con, but mostly con, on the foreign mission question, she spoke out sharply as follows:

We hear a great deal of talk about obedience now, but most of us simmer it down to obeying a few church rules and keeping the ordinances, with an occasional testimony in meeting, and expect a blessing; while the greater commands, to "go into all the world and preach the Gospel," to be self-denying, and to "give freely," pass, for the most part, unheeded.<sup>7</sup>

Several weeks later she again pressed her case upon the conscience of the Church in an article entitled, "How Much Owest Thou?," from which the following excerpts are taken:

. . . . the 23rd of the present month has been appointed a special missionary Sunday in our church. We should truly praise God for this, as all of us, if we are so disposed, may bring in our offerings for special missionary work . . . .

. . . .



Let us beware lest while we pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, we omit weightier matters. That is, let us beware lest, in our careful keeping of ordinances, and in our obedience to forms, we neglect the weightier matter of spreading the Gospel.

We treasure up so carefully the last requests of dying friends, and try so hard to fulfill them, and yet we are so indifferent to our Master's farewell orders, given over 1800 years ago.

Oh, brothers and sisters, let us awaken from this stupor; shake off this Laodicean lukewarmness, lest we be spewed out of his mouth.<sup>8</sup>

When General Conference met in 1895 at Stayner, Ontario, we are not surprised to note that Rhoda Lee's influence was deeply felt by the assembly. We may surmise that she was present in person, for here her second paper on foreign missions was read. This time the paper was noticed by the official record, and the minutes state, "A paper on foreign mission work by Rhoda E. Lee was read setting forth the necessity of, and urging the brethren to, a more active work in that direction."<sup>9</sup> This minute record is something of an understatement, for the second paper probed mercilessly into the conscience and lethargy of the Church. The full text is given below.

To the Brethren and Sisters in Christ at general Conference assembled, greeting: Grace be with you, and peace from God the Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Another Conference year has rolled around; a year that has brought with it many changes and many sorrows. The hand of the Lord has been laid very heavily upon some of us--bright hopes have been blasted, loved ones have been laid away to rest, and sickness and calamity have visited many of us.

But notwithstanding all of this, we are willing to acknowledge that our blessings have far outnumbered our griefs.

Not to me alone has come the question of the Psalmist: "What shall I render unto the Lord for all his benefits toward me?" And it is a question most meet for the thankful heart to ask.

To do something for the one who benefits us is the first natural impulse of the grateful heart. But as we consider the Giver of every good and perfect gift, we know we may do and do, and still be "unprofitable servants."

And so the truly humble soul must content itself with offering the "sacrifice of praise" continually and in obeying our God's commands. I can not help thinking that praise unaccompanied by obedience falls flat on our Master's ears.

We who are parents know that the obedient child is the one who loves us. Not daring to measure the mind of Christ by our own feeble ones, we hear him saying: "If ye LOVE me keep my commandments." And again: "He that hath my commandments and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me."

Where does He give a greater command than, "Go ye therefore into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature?"

Brethren, we profess to love the Lord Jesus, and talk much of obedience; is it not time for us this year, this day, this hour to begin some definite work for spreading the Gospel?

We have had our feelings touched often by the appeals of the heathen, have shed a few tears about them, and perhaps eased our consciences by stepping into some other church and dropping a few cents into the foreign missionary collection, and decline again into carelessness. On the 23d of last September a collection for foreign missions was taken up. Some of our best givers refused to subscribe, preferring to place their money where it could soonest be used for the salvation of souls, instead of putting it away for the "moths and rust to corrupt." There were others who contributed to the fund hoping for results. And what are the results? Months have passed and no steps taken for the work. How long, O Lord, how long must this be so? If we let this Conference pass without doing some definite work for foreign missions, we are not true to our trust. What we need is consecrated men and women to go, and consecrated ones to support those who go. And we need to lay some field to heart, and devote our time, our attention, our prayers and our money to that field and the workers sent there.

Hear what Dr. Gordon says: "Forget not that your first and principal business as a disciple of Christ is to give the Gospel to those who have it not. He who is not a missionary Christian will be a missing Christian when the great day comes for bestowing the rewards for service; therefore ask yourselves daily what the Lord would have you to do, in connection with the work of carrying the Gospel to the perishing millions. Search carefully whether He would have you go yourself to the heathen, if you have the youth and fitness required for the work. Or if you cannot go in person, inquire diligently what blood mortgage on your property, in the interest of foreign missions. How much you owe to the heathen because of what you owe to Christ for what he has done for you with his own precious blood. I warn you that it will go hard with you when your Lord comes to reckon with you, if he finds your wealth hoarded up in needless accumulations instead of being sacredly devoted to giving the Gospel to the lost."

Listen to this: "A native woman in India, when told of God's way of forgiving sins, exclaimed, "And do all the women in your country know this and do not come to tell us about it over here? Oh, I would measure my length all the way across the dark waters to tell anybody about Jesus who did not know about him. Oh, tell them to hasten and tell us the blessed story of a Savior." Does this touch our hearts? Remember, she is only one in many millions.

In some localities in our country the words River Brethren are but another name for prosperity, and I speak it to our shame that in the 190 years of our church's existence she has never sent a foreign missionary to the field. It is a marvel to many that a church professing separation and whose members possess such a large amount of property has not done so.

This has been fitly called the missionary dispensation, and students of prophecy call it the eleventh hour of the age. And our Master, with the harvest fields lying white before us, asks, in rebuking voice, "Why stand ye here all the day idle?"



Oh, is there nothing to awaken us out of this stupor?

Let us consecrate ourselves this hour, and promise the Most High that this Gospel shall be spread--consecrate ourselves soul, body, time and money before it is eternally too late.

Usually, in our meetings we have four or five preachers to minister to a small congregation, and I think of the many millions in the foreign and home lands who are sitting in the outer darkness, without a preacher or a single witness for Christ,--and I know they should scatter abroad and carry the tidings where Christ is not named.

To-day I make a prayerful appeal to the Brethren, especially to those in authority, to be up and about the "King's business." Don't put it off. "Procrastination is the thief of time," and it requires haste.

If this is not done I have confidence to believe that there are some among us who will go out relying on the promise in Philpp. 4: 19, coupled with the sweet assurance in Matt. 28:20: "Lo, I am with you alway."

Already has one of our band set the noble example and soon, in darkest Africa, will be telling the story of redemption. God bless Hettie Fernbaugh and may she be an inspiration to "go forth weeping bearing precious seed" that we may "come again rejoicing, bringing our sheaves with us."

"He which soweth sparingly shall reap also sparingly, and he which soweth bountifully shall reap also bountifully." "Blessed is he which soweth beside all waters." Don't give your money or yourselves grudgingly nor of necessity, for "God loveth a cheerful giver."

Leaving this now to your consideration, I am,

Your Sister in Christ,

RHODA E. LEE.<sup>10</sup>

The Conference at which the above paper was read made the second crucial decision for foreign missions. Following the reading, a recess was taken. We do not know what transpired during this recess, but we may surmise that the delegates continued to be confronted by Rhoda Lee's clarion call to foreign mission endeavor. In any case, when Conference reconvened, the foreign mission question came immediately to the foreground and an historic action was taken as follows:

On motion a mission board was appointed for foreign mission work, consisting of Bros. Peter Steckley, Bethesda, Ont.; B. F. Hoover, Mansfield, Ohio; J. E. Stauffer, Newton, Kansas, and presented to General Council and duly appointed for the term of five years subject, however, to the advice and control of General Conference.<sup>11</sup>

Rhoda Lee's missionary concerns were not confined to the far horizons of foreign fields. In November, 1895, in an article entitled, "The Mountain White People," we find her pleading for mission efforts on behalf of the poor white class of the South. This article reveals that its author had considerable historical and socio-

logical insight, as well as broad factual knowledge, about the people for whom she felt concern. In her characteristic way, she closed her article with the following ringing challenge:

. . . It may be there are those in our Brotherhood, who are interested in missions, who are consecrated and self denying and looking for work who can and will say: "Lord I am ready send me to these people." It is a work that doubtless must be done; and that doubtless will require God reaching prayer and self reaching denial-- yet not without its disappointments, privations, hardships and perils. But withal, a work that will be blest of God in the harvest of precious souls and the hastening of the coming of the Lord of the Harvest. Praying that God may add a blessing to this, I remain yours for the spread of the Gospel.<sup>12</sup>

Rhoda E. Lee

Rhoda E. Lee was a married woman, for we find that in December, 1895, she was about to move with her family to Scranton, Kansas, to do mission work among the miners. Her husband was already there.<sup>13</sup>

Mrs. Lee was still in Scranton about two years later when an evangelistic party of Kansas brethren and sisters came to that place in the "Gospel Wagon." One of the party reported that they met "sister Lee who was overcome by prostration because of the joy she had in looking into our faces. She is about all alone in the city which is given over to drunkenness and the lodge."<sup>14</sup> This is the last reference to Rhoda Lee, which has been found by the present writer.

Considerable mystery surrounds the career of this unusual woman, and various queries come to mind. Why is she not listed under her married name in any of the church directories of the period in which she lived? What was her maiden name? How did she gain personal access to the platform of General Conference? How did she acquire the information and the intellectual breadth reflected in her writings? Why has she been almost completely forgotten? This last query is perhaps the most intriguing of all. Frances Davidson, writing about 1915, makes passing reference to the paper which Mrs. Lee read to the Conference of 1894.<sup>15</sup> Later writers on the foreign mission work of the Church, possibly following Miss Davidson, also take note of this paper.<sup>16</sup> The great paper which Rhoda Lee prepared for presentation to Conference in 1895, however, seems to have completely escaped the attention of those writers who have interested themselves in the mission work of the Church.

Another most curious aspect of the problem emerges from contacts with surviving contemporaries of Rhoda E. Lee. Thus far, the present writer's inquiries among these persons have revealed memories of Rhoda Lee, but none seems to be aware of her tremendous contribution to the launching of the Brethren in Christ foreign mission enterprise. Some surviving contemporaries even doubt that she was a member of the Church, but the preceding passages from her writings seem to disprove this skepticism. She certainly wrote as though she considered herself an integral part of the group.

Perhaps some readers of Notes and Queries are in a position to press inquiries for further information about Rhoda E. Lee. Should such information come to light, please make it available for future release through this paper.

<sup>1</sup>A manuscript volume filed with the C. N. Hostetter Papers. The Archives of the Brethren in Christ Church.

<sup>2</sup>Minutes of the General Conference of the Brethren in Christ, Commonly Known as River Brethren, Held at Detroit, Kansas, May 16 to 18, 1894, p. 4.



<sup>3</sup>Evangelical Visitor, XI (October 15, 1898), p. 394; ibid. (November 15, 1898), p. 438.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid. (October 15, 1898), p. 396; ibid. (November 15, 1898), p. 434.

<sup>5</sup>Photocopy of manuscript in The Archives of the Brethren in Christ Church.

<sup>6</sup>Evangelical Visitor, VII (June 1, 1894), pp. 162, 163.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., (August 15, 1894), p. 242.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., (September 15, 1894), p. 275.

<sup>9</sup>Council of 1895 Held in Nottawasaga, Simcoe County, Ontario, May 15th to 17th, p. 2.

<sup>10</sup>Evangelical Visitor, VIII (July 1, 1895), pp. 193, 194.

<sup>11</sup>Council of 1895 Held in Nottawasaga, Simcoe County, Ontario, May 15th to 17th, p. 2.

<sup>12</sup>Evangelical Visitor, VIII (November 15, 1895), p. 341.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., VIII (December 15, 1895), p. 376.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., X (September 15, 1897), p. 307. For a description of the "Gospel Wagon," see ibid., p. 226.

<sup>15</sup>H. Frances Davidson, South and South Central Africa: a Record of Fifteen Years' Missionary Labors Among Primitive Peoples (Elgin, Ill.: The Author, 1915), p. 20.

<sup>16</sup>Anna R. Engle, et. al., There Is No Difference: God Works in Africa and India (Nappanee, Ind.: E. V. Publishing House, c. 1950), p. 14.

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