

A Short Biography of Melba Rees

Melba Mildred (Palmer) Rees lived a life that revolved around missions and family. Both of those interests dated from her early childhood.

At the time of her birth on February 11, 1913, her father, Eugene A. Palmer, was a ministerial student in Enid, Oklahoma. He and his wife, Jessie (Parsons), had felt the challenge to missions but didn't feel they could go themselves, so they prayed that at least one of their children would be a missionary.

Melba always remembered standing in front of a church group at the age of five to recite "I'm a little missionary, that's what I'm going to be, as soon as I get big enough; just wait and you will see." As she said it, she realized she meant it.

As the oldest girl in a family of seven children, Melba was a big help to her frail mother, taking more and more responsibility for the care of each new baby as it arrived. By the time the youngest was born, Melba was considered experienced enough, at the age of eleven, to assume almost full care of the baby.

Melba's father ministered to a number of struggling churches in the Northwest, getting each one more solidly on its feet before moving on to another. He died when Melba was 14, and the fatherless family moved to Eugene, Oregon. They all worked together to make it through the Depression with help from Christian friends.

Melba graduated from high school as valedictorian of her class, and received a scholarship to Bible college. After her graduation from Northwest Christian College in 1936, she raised support and set sail for her chosen field of Tibet in 1938, as a young and healthy 25-year-old.

Ill health hampered her mission work almost from the beginning, and she was finally advised to return to the States after two years for more medical tests than were available on the field. By the time she arrived in the States, she was much better. It seemed that it was the high altitude that had made her sick, but she determined to go back and try again, while being prepared to move down to a lower altitude if necessary.

Her return was delayed for six years because of

the war, so she used that time to tell the churches about the work in Tibet and to study Chinese at a language school in Berkeley, California. It was in Berkeley that she met Bill Rees and recruited him to the mission field, though she turned down his marriage proposal just before boarding the ship to finally return to Tibet.

It was an eventful trip, and took her a year, but when she reached the high altitude, it again made her sick, so she moved down to Kunming, China. Bill had arrived there by then, and he and Melba were married and soon started a family. On the day that their first son, Benjamin Allen, was born, the American Consulate in Kunming sent out a notice saying that all non-essential American personnel should leave, as they could no longer guarantee their safety from the Communists who were taking over the country.

They had heard that the churches in South Africa had been asking for missionaries to come help them but that none had been able to get visas. They decided to go there, since Bill was British and they could get in with no problem. They worked with the African churches until other missionaries did finally arrive, and then they started a work among the many Chinese living in Kimberley, South Africa.

Two more children were born there, Daniel Dean and Eunice Joy, before they finally took their first furlough as a couple. Another daughter, Phoebe Gay, was born at the end of that furlough. After their return, the Chinese work continued to grow, but during their next furlough, they decided that others could carry on with that work and they would go to Hong Kong, where one of the Christians from South Africa had moved and had been looking for a church to attend.

Bill had to return to South Africa to sell their house and pack up and ship their belongings. This took longer than expected, and finally Melba took the four children and went ahead to Hong Kong. While she waited for Bill to join them, Melba began Bible studies and worship services in their home.

Melba always considered herself a missionary, not just a missionary wife, and she remained fully involved in the work even after Bill rejoined the family. She taught Sunday School, led Bible studies, taught English as a way of making contacts, taught Bible in a school, played the piano for church services, wrote articles for the church paper, and much more, in addition to keeping in touch with supporters. She didn't neglect her family, though, and she always had time while she was

cooking supper to listen to her children tell about their day at school.

Even after she left the high altitude, Melba continued to suffer with various health problems, especially arthritis, until finally she was unable to get around well enough to do much mission work. In 1995, Bill and Melba retired from the mission field and went to live in Spring River Christian Village, in Joplin, Missouri. At first, Melba was well enough to live in an independent-living apartment with Bill, but in 1998 she had to move into nursing care because she was getting too confused to properly care for herself.

In May last year, Bill fell and hit his head. After some initial recovery, he developed several kinds of infections, including pneumonia, and on June 10, 2001, he went to be with the Lord.

Melba continued to decline in health, both physically and mentally, and on May 19, 2002, God freed her from her pain-filled body and took her home to join many family members and Christian friends, from the U.S., Tibet, South Africa, Hong Kong and elsewhere, who had gone on before her.

Although she never took credit for it herself, preferring to give the glory to God, Melba was very happy that all her children are dedicated Christians, actively serving the Lord in various parts of the world. Ben and his wife Karen are missionaries in Hong Kong. They have two grown children. Dan and his wife "Shy" work together at College Press, a Christian publisher in Joplin. Shy has three grown sons and four grandchildren. Joy and her husband Dwight work on a farm near Lamar, Missouri. They have three teenage sons. Phoebe is a missionary in South Africa. Whether on the mission field or living in the States, all of them have their mother's love for missions.

Joy Crockett &
Phoebe Rees
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