

A Short Biography of Bill Rees

William Oliver "Bill" Rees lived a life punctuated by many moves and many transitions -- transitions that were sometimes heartily resisted at first, but, once made, were wholeheartedly embraced.

Bill Rees was born in the coal-mining town of Troedyrhiw in South Wales on August 4, 1914 -- which, he was fond of pointing out, was the day Britain entered the war against Germany in what later became known as the 1st World War.

Food shortages because of the war, plus the general poverty of the area and of the family, led to his developing rickets as an infant. This prevented him from being able to walk until he was several years old, and left him bowlegged for life. Later in life he became an avid walker who impressed younger people with his speed and stamina.

In 1928 the worsening economic situation in Britain led to the Reeses and other relatives emigrating to Canada, to the small town of Lussac in a coal-mining region of the Rocky Mountains in Alberta, Canada.

In Wales the Rees family had been active in the Salvation Army and then the Wesleyan Methodists. In Canada they joined the United Church of Canada. In 1936, Bill Rees heard the challenge of undenominational New Testament Christianity presented. After following the Berean example of searching the Scriptures to verify what he was being taught, he was immersed, along with his older brother, David Howell Rees.

Bill's father had been a lay preacher in the Salvation Army and Wesleyan Methodists. As a child, Bill himself had sometimes been called "Parson" by the other kids. After his baptism, others had urged him to train to be a preacher, but he had resisted until his leg was broken in a mining accident. A long hospital stay gave him time to reflect, and he left hospital determined to go to Bible college.

Bill's Bible college studies were a struggle since he had dropped out of high school, but he managed to graduate from Alberta Bible College in 1944. His graduating class consisted of "The 3 Rs" -- Bill Rees, Tom Rash and Frank Rempel -- all three of whom later became missionaries.

Following his graduation, Bill ministered to churches in Aylmer, Ontario, and Berkeley, California. While he was in Berkeley, his brother David Howell Rees decided to play matchmaker. David Rees and his wife Lois were preparing to go to the mission field of Tibet. They managed, after several attempts, to introduce Bill to a young woman who was on her way back to the mission work in Tibet -- Melba Parrier. Bill proposed to Melba after she had actually boarded the ship for her return to Asia. Her response? "You know I'm going back to the mission field." His? "That's what I want to do, too."

She sailed on the ship. He resigned from the ministry there in Berkeley, raised support, and eventually made it to Kuming, west China, near the Tibetan border. They were married there in Kuming on August 20, 1943, and their first son, Benjamin Allen, was born there the following year.

The Communist Revolution in China in 1949 forced most of the missionaries out of the country. Bill, Melba, and Ben Allen flew out to Hong Kong where they boarded a tramp steamer that took them to South Africa. Their next two children, Dannie, Dean and Eunice Joy, were born in South Africa. A fourth child, Phoebe Gay, was born during their first furlough.

In South Africa they first worked with black churches, but just as others were able to take over this work they discovered that there is also a sizable Chinese population in South Africa. They then turned their attention once again to work with Chinese.

In 1960 they left South Africa on a second furlough, fully expecting to return. However, various things combined to change their plans. They lost a lot of financial support, which required extra time to raise replacement support. Missionaries who had taken over the South African work temporarily decided to stay or permanently. And they received word of a need in Hong Kong that they felt they could fill.

After they had raised part of the needed support, Bill returned to South Africa to pack up their possessions and wind up business there. In May 1963 Melba and the four children sailed to Hong Kong and began the work. Bill had trouble selling the property they owned in South Africa, but was able to rejoin the family in the summer of 1964.

In Hong Kong their main work was founding and building up a church which is now the Mongkok

Church of Christ, a thriving independent congregation. In addition to this main work, Bill also assisted with a couple of other congregations, served for many years as the supervisor of a Christian school, and did much mimeographing of materials, including tracts, for his own work and for the ministries of others.

Of their four children, two are themselves missionaries today -- Ben, with his wife Karen, back in Hong Kong, and Phoebe back in South Africa (after earlier work in Taiwan and Saint Vincent). Dan and his wife "Shy" work for a Christian organization, College Press, in Joplin, MO. Joy and her husband Dwight have a farm outside of Lamar, MO, and are active in the Bethel Church near Lamar.

In 1995, when Bill was 81, a combination of Melba's failing health and rising rents in Hong Kong forced them to return to the U.S. to retire. They moved to the Spring River Christian Village in Joplin, MO. The first time that Ben saw his parents back in the States after their retirement, Bill confided in him, "I didn't want to retire, because I didn't want to be stuck in an 'old folks home' somewhere. But this isn't like an 'old folks home.' All my friends are here!" In Joplin, Bill continued to be active in the church and in attending Christian meetings, conventions and area men's rallies.

The evening of May 6, 2001, Bill suffered a fall down some steps while he was on his way to church. This fractured his skull and caused bleeding in the brain. He was making a slow but steady recovery from the head injuries, but finally succumbed to a host of secondary infections, including pneumonia. He died at around 5:30 on Sunday morning, June 10. He fought hard for life, right up to the end, but now that he is gone we can imagine him saying, "I didn't want to leave my life down there, but now I'm here, I'm glad I've come! I have friends here!"

Ben Rees
June, 2001