

Scanning and Sleuthing: Archives and Adventist Daily Life in the 1880s

“O the responsibility of this work!” Jennie Thayer, a thirty-four-year-old assistant secretary of the International Tract and Missionary Society stationed in Great Grimsby, England, wrote that one hundred thirty years and one day ago, on June 25, 1887. Later in the summer the Adventist missionaries, including Thayer, would move the mission headquarters from Grimsby to London, something approved months later by the 1887 General Conference session, as recorded in the 1888 Yearbook:

Resolved, That we approve of the removal of the office of publication in England from Great Grimsby to London, and the opening of a depot for our publications in Paternoster Row; and we bid the mission workers there Godspeed in their efforts to establish the cause on a firm basis in the very heart of the English-speaking world.

This resolution gives us the most basic facts of the matter, but it does not give us the story. What did establishing ‘the cause on a firm basis’ in the unorganized field of Great Britain look like at the ground level? What did these pioneer missionaries do in Grimsby and London? What details can we learn about their lives from any archival records they left behind?

And what sort of archival processing is needed in order to delve into those details? This paper reports on the ongoing project being undertaken to scan, transcribe, and understand the personal diaries of Jennie Thayer, an Adventist pioneer who was involved with the publishing ministry of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, including helping start the British paper, *Present Truth*, in 1884, working with other pioneers such as J. N. Loughborough, M. C. Wilcox, and S. N. Haskell. “Scanning and Sleuthing: Archives and Adventist Daily Life in the 1880s” will explore these topics.

When I interned with the Office of Archives, Statistics and Research (ASTR) in Summer 2014, I processed and created finding aids for several small ‘personal’ collections. One of these collections was the F. C. Gilbert Personal Collection. In this collection I found seventeen diaries of a woman named Jennie Thayer, whom I had never heard about. The diaries were in the Gilbert Collection because Thayer had been the aunt of Gilbert’s wife; the earliest diary is from 1875 and the latest from 1916.

In the finding aid I included basic biographical information about Thayer, gleaned from her obituaries in both the *Review* and the *Atlantic Union Gleaner*. To me, Thayer is, in many ways, a great example of a pioneer Adventist from the second generation of Seventh-day Adventists. Thayer was born to Abijah and Rhoda Thayer in Buckland, Massachusetts on September 20, 1853. Thayer attended Battle Creek College and worked in Battle Creek Sanitarium during her time in school. Before and after her schooling, however, she was attached to the publishing work of the church. Thayer held positions in both the state tract society and the International Tract and Missionary Society. Her work as a missionary in England was chiefly concerned with publishing *Present Truth* and tract work, and she was the first editor of the *Atlantic Union Gleaner*, which is still published today. Whether in public or in private, she served the cause of Christ until her death on September 12, 1940.

When I joined ASTR in August 2015, I realized that more could be done with the Thayer diaries and decided that more should be done. I began by scanning the 1877 diary on our book scanner, a Zeutschel OS 15000 using Omnican software, which came with the machine. We jointly use this book scanner with the Ellen G. White Estate.

The scanner allows for material to be laid flat and then scanned. The book to be scanned is nestled onto the plates, a glass cover is brought down, and then either a button is clicked or a foot pedal pumped and both sides are scanned. The person using the scanner can adjust the selection boxes in order to get straight and clear scans. Unless a re-scan is initiated, the preview is the scan. Then the person using the scanner can turn the page and begin the process again. While the process does take time (as everything does), it's relative to the size of the object and any difficulties encountered while scanning. The three diaries I have scanned so far have probably taken a day and a half in total to scan them. The Thayer diaries are small—most can fit squarely in the palm of my hand. This makes situating them on the scanner's plates more difficult than a standard-sized book.

Once each diary is scanned, I create a PDF of the images, while retaining the TIF images of the pages. The images and the PDFs are presently stored on one of our drives that we use for storing scanned materials. We are still figuring out the best way to provide wider access to these scans.

After I have a PDF to work from, I begin work on the transcription of that diary. *Transcription* is the technical term for the action or process of transcribing something, or creating a representation of something, in this case, the handwritten entries in Thayer's diaries. I created a Word document that is essentially a table of tables and then I type what is on each scanned diary page into the document, line by line. This means that mistakes, cross-outs, misspellings, and other idiosyncrasies are retained and consistently represented as well as possible on the page. Occasionally I do have to check what I see on the page against the original diary, and for those moments I make use of a magnifying glass. Thayer's 1887 diary has three entries on each page, which makes for cramped entries when she had a lot to say.

I also make notes of when I could not decipher something, be it a letter, word, phrase, or name, with triangular brackets. As I grew accustomed to Thayer's handwriting, it became easier to decipher her handwriting, which, though small, is neat and fairly easy to read. She wrote her *p*'s strangely compared to her other letters, but that seems to be the main quirk of her handwriting. Having transcribed letters and other handwritten documents from ASTR's holdings, it's my opinion that her handwriting is rather excellent.

As I read and transcribed, one question kept recurring in my mind: What does this tell me about her life as a Seventh-day Adventist? I had never heard of her before, but here she was, living and working alongside people whose names I readily knew: George W. Amadon, who met her at the train station when she arrived to study at Battle Creek College in 1877; Stephen Haskell, president of the International Tract and Missionary Society; William A. Spicer, ten years' or so her junior and working with her on the *Present Truth*, just to name a few.

Of course, any diary is written from the viewpoint of the writer. Pocket diaries, of women in particular, were meant as semi-public records of domestic happenings and left little to no room for a writer's thoughts, though occasionally said thoughts would still make it to the page. Thayer's diary from 1877, for example, includes the briefest account of a visit from Sidney Brownsberger and John Harvey Kellogg. Beyond the mention of their names, the fact that they were at the door, and three heavily-marked

exclamation points, Thayer doesn't divulge how she felt about the encounter. However, this was fairly common for pocket diaries. [SOURCES FROM ARTICLES]

Thayer's diary entries from 1887 follow this basic pattern—weather, comings and goings, and other items of note. Occasionally she offers a personal thought, though the space is limited. With that in mind, what we can learn about the Adventists in England in one week in 1887? Well, let's see what Thayer wrote about this week; June 25, 1887 was a Sabbath. Thayer writes:

Both clouds and sun. Eld. H. spoke on Zech. 4:6. About forty-five in attendance. Missionary Reading in the afternoon followed by social meeting. Lizzie was up a few moments, and Eld. R. and wife, also Carrie, and Bertha N. made me a call. Eld. H. came up to consider the matter of editing "P. T." Sr. Green and Clara called this eve and gave a sad report concerning Alice A., but I am not surprised. They brought Sr. L. a lovely bouquet. Sr. N. wants to go to Africa. All took part in the meeting this afternoon but Mr. G. and Nellie G. sat down stairs and visited this eve with W. O the responsibility of this work! Am I ungrateful? I want to consecrate all my powers of body and mind to him who gave them to me.

Since Thayer had limited space *and* knew who and what she was referring to as she wrote, she used abbreviations. While some of the abbreviations are clear from contextual clues in the rest of the diary, sleuthing through the SDA Yearbook and other sources allows us to figure out others, though it can be a slow process. "P.T." stands for *Present Truth*, which was only in its third year of publication; "Eld. H." seems to usually be Haskell. "Eld R. and wife" are most likely D. A. Robinson and Edna Robinson, as they were stationed in England that year.

Sunday 26.

Pleasant. Good long visit with Sr. Robinson. Emily G. called. Am afraid I was not cordial as I should be. Poor Carrie! Eld. H. spoke this eve on Matt. 5:6. Thirty-six present. It was a very searching and practical discourse. After meeting we sat around the fire and discussed the East and West -- the ever-contestible theme. There are six New Englander's here, and three westerners. I was too rude in my remark concerning Minnesota. What an unruly member is my tongue!

While it's not clear whether they discussed theology or simply argued about whose section of the United States was better ("East" meaning "New England" and "West" meaning "Midwest", it appears to me that there was a certain camaraderie among the missionaries in Grimsby. (Also I'd love to know what Thayer said about Minnesota, especially seeing as Spicer was from Minnesota, but alas, she kept it to herself.)

June, Monday 27. 1887.

Clear and very warm. Eld. H. went to London, and Eld. R. and wife, Sr. Durland, Sr. Mace, and Sr. Neubaum went to Kettering. Letters from Eld. Smith, Bro. Sheppard, and a man in Florida. What with Sr. Durland to Sr. Judd's, and then to the station to see them off. My children did not come tonight. Ella and Ethel made me a call. I called at Sr. Swallow's. Am sorry to hear that Lizzie S. does not get her S. S. lesson. I wish I might help her.

Thayer records the travels of the others in the mission and who she received letters from. While she was unmarried and childless, she was also a former schoolteacher, and there are multiple entries of 'her' children coming to study a lesson or having missed a lesson. It appears that these children were a mix of the missionary children and children in the Sabbath School she took part in.

Tuesday 28.

A lovely day. Read proof. Wrote post cards to Eliza and Eld. A. T. Robinson, also Bro. Sheppard, Bro. Durland, and Eld. U. Smith. Eld. Boyd led the prayer-meeting this eve. There were sixteen present and all took part but Mr. G. Lillie and Ethel came to study their lesson. Wrote letter to Eld. Wilcox.

In addition to recording the letters she received, Thayer also recorded who she wrote to. From an archivist-wearing-a-historian's-hat standpoint, such notations are important clues when trying to track down a person's correspondence. In this case, it's likely that most of Thayer's correspondence has been lost to posterity, but entries like this point out possibilities for further research. For example, if Thayer records writing to a General Conference officer, I could always check our Presidential, Secretariat, or Treasury correspondence collections to see if the letter is held there.

Wednesday 29.

Beautiful day. Went to Sr. Robinson's with Ella, and to the station where she and Bro. and Sr. Boyd, and Bro. L. took the train for London. I weigh nine stone. Bro. Mason and Sr. Swallow came in this eve to nominate officers for S. S. Wrote post card to Eld. B. L. Whitney. I weigh nine stone, or 8 st. 3 lbs without clothing. Underclothing weighs 2.13 oz.

Nominating officers is something we still do today; I recently served on such a committee! Also, this entry provides a detail about Thayer that probably could not have been gleaned from her photograph. As I did not know, but some of you probably already do, a *stone* is equivalent to fourteen pounds, or 6.4 kilograms. So Thayer weighed about 126 pounds, or a tiny bit above 57 kilograms. For me, it's a fascinating detail to know.

June, Thursday 30. 1887.

Very pleasant and warm. Read proof. Letter and card from J. H. D. Bro. Spicer went to London. First strawberries for dinner, only 6 L per pound. Took a long walk for this eve, and retired directly after.

"J. H. D." is probably J. H. Durland, and "Bro. Spicer" is the twenty-two-year-old William A. Spicer, future missionary to India, future General Conference secretary and president.

July, Friday 1.

Warm and pleasant. Read proof. Went to the market for strawberries and called at Mrs. Burkett's and Sr. Gresswell's. There were nineteen at meeting this eve and Bro. Hilliard gave a Bible-reading on "Life". Mr. Good brought me two lovely bouquets of roses, syringas, and ferns. Sr. Ford and Sr. Robinson called.

Reading proof and stitching papers were two of the tasks that Thayer did in regards to her work on the *Present Truth*, and others often accompanied her in these tasks. Spicer

helped read proof several times, and the other ladies would often stitch papers together. It seemed to be very much a team effort to get the *Present Truth* to print.

While what I have just shared is only a glimpse into the lives of Adventist missionaries in England in 1887, it is my hope that as the project to digitize and transcribe Jennie Thayer's diaries will provide us larger windows into what life was like for a Seventh-day Adventist woman actively and totally involved in the cause of Christ and a wider look into the daily lives of pioneer Seventh-day Adventists on the whole. Archivists have the responsibility of opening those windows; they do so by processing archival material and providing access to said material, and I look forward to what we will discover as this project continues.