

Woodrow and Sara (Schilling) Bartges Missionaries/Prisoners

Woodrow Allen Bartges (1913-1997) was born in Sugar Valley, Clinton County PA, home of his ancestors for five generations. Sara Elizabeth Schilling (1912-2000) was born in Lewistown, Mifflin County PA. Both were raised in the Evangelical Church.

Woodrow attended the denomination's schools in Reading PA, graduating from Albright College in 1935 and from the Evangelical School of Theology¹ in 1938. Having received his preaching license in 1932, he served under appointment on the Keystone-Perry charge in Perry County PA during his last two years in seminary. Upon graduating from seminary in 1938, he married Sara on August 10, 1938.

The two of them had met at the denomination's summer assembly site, Central Oak Heights, near West Milton in Union County PA. Those were the days before church camps as we know them today, and the programming – even for the youth – was oriented more toward leadership development and Bible study than to outdoor recreational activities. Woodrow was there as a ministerial student, likely in connection with the Young People's Union Convention²; Sara was working in the dining hall. The story is that Sara was reluctantly cast in a magic act that was part of a variety show the staff was putting on for the guests, and the next day Woodrow approached her in the dining hall to introduce himself. The rest, as they say, is history.

After serving 3 years at Nescopeck, in Luzerne County PA, Woodrow and Sara put **“Where He Leads Me I Will Follow”** into practice and left in 1941 as missionaries to China. Little did they know what awaited them. The following italicized paragraphs are taken from an article by noted Susquehanna Valley columnist and storyteller Joe Diblin.³

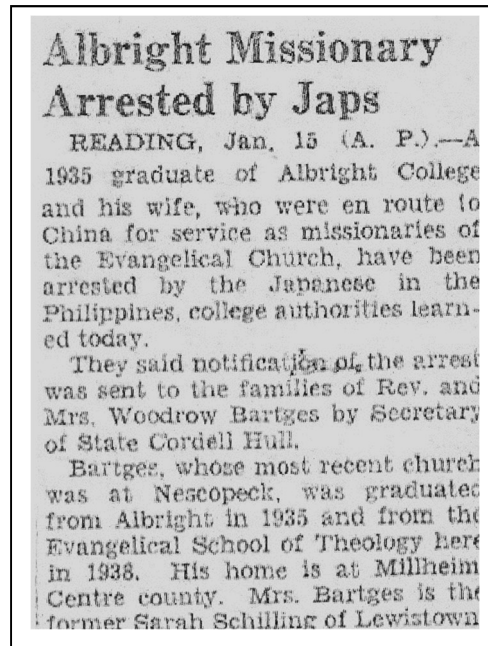
¹ Following the 1946 union of the Evangelical and United Brethren denominations in 1946, the former's Evangelical School of Theology in Reading merged in 1954 into latter's Bonebrake Theological Seminary in Dayton Ohio to form the present United Theological Seminary.

² Woodrow's classmate, William E. Basom – who also graduated from Albright College in 1935 and Evangelical School of Theology in 1938 – was for a time the president of the Young People's Union and presided at their Conventions, and that may have been the reason for Woodrow being at Central Oak Heights. Years later Linda Bartges, the only surviving child of Woodrow and Sara, would wed Scott Basom, the son of William E. and Mary (Nash) Basom.

³ Joseph Armstead Diblin (1917-2021) was born in New Jersey and came to the Susquehanna Valley in 1936 via a basketball scholarship to Bucknell University, from which institution he graduated in 1940 with a degree in journalism. Having worked at a local airport and taken flight lessons as a youth in New Jersey, he enlisted in the Army Air Corps immediately after graduating from Bucknell and trained hundreds of WWII pilots. He retired from Piper Aircraft in Williamsport in 1980 and pursued his passion for writing articles about WWII and its veterans.

Reverend Woodrow and Sara Bartges were appointed by the Mission Board of the Evangelical Church in 1941 to serve five years in China. Here were two fine young people whose desire in life was to serve God and their fellow humans. Arriving in Manila in the Philippines in December 1941, they were to face the next 37 months in internment by the Japanese.

The following January 1942 newspaper clipping, preserved and shared with *The Chronicle* by grandson Allen Basom, was how the Evangelical community in Central Pennsylvania received the news.



The awful experience began the morning of December 8, 1941, with the news of the Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbor. Since there was no way to escape from the Philippines, the Bartges could only wait helplessly until the Japanese invaded their area. On December 31, the enemy arrived and told them all civilians would be taken to a nearby prison camp. In their words, "The doors of freedom were closing."

The first prison was a former military barracks built to accommodate 126 soldiers. The Japanese forced 430 civilian internees into the building. They were always hungry and dirty. The daily menu consisted of but two items – a small bowl of rice in the morning and a small bowl of thin soup at night. The daily ration of water was about half a glass per person. To add to the misery, an epidemic of dysentery broke out. Fortunately, there were interned civilian doctors and nurses who, despite very limited medicines and equipment, took care of their fellow prisoners.

Five months later, the internees were forced to move to a new prison location. Arriving there, they found, to their dismay, there were 500 American

civilians and 600 Chinese occupying a facility designed to accommodate only 200. Here they suffered from April 1942 until December 1944.

Their Christian faith was a great sustaining force for the Bartges during their internment by the Japanese. Reverend Woodrow wrote the following in his diary during 1943: "Thank God for something that will not let one be a quitter when he feels like quitting; that will not let his head go under when he feels almost sunk. God gave me the peace to brace up, snap out, and go forward in the power of the Holy Spirit."

It was also difficult for friends and family at home in the States who, too, needed the peace and power of the Holy Spirit to go on with their lives. The December 14, 1943, *Lewistown Sentinel*, pages 1 and 3, carried the following article under the heading "Four Months for Their First Letter to Reach Home in Two Years."

Mr. and Mrs. E.P. Schilling of 104 Pannebaker Avenue today were reading and re-reading the first letter they have had from their son-in-law and daughter, Rev. and Mrs. W.A. Bartges in two years... The letter was dated August 21... The letter in full is as follows.

Dear Dad, Mother and All:

Through the services of the International Red Cross and the courtesy of the Japanese Imperial Army we are enabled to write.

We are living under the protective custody of the J.I.A. here on our three-acre camp. Of the 517 British and Americans here, about 150 are missionaries. Our living quarters: three barracks, one men, two women; five cottages... We had a 23-day typhoon in July.

The variety of our food is naturally limited, but with such regulars as rice, bananas, string beans, sweet potatoes, gabi,⁴ etc., we are getting along OK. A dietician plans our meals. A former hotel chef is our chief cook. Memories of mother's cooking linger indelibly.

As intelligent, religious people, the internees had some good leadership among the civilian members. They established school programs in a number of subjects. Worthwhile entertainment activities were also activated. Although the Japanese tried to prevent Christian services, the prisoners persevered and finally achieved their goal.

On December 27, 1944, the prisoners were forced to move again. This time it was back to Manila. Reaching there at night, they described the experience: "Suddenly, there loomed up before us a high stone wall. A huge iron gate opened and we fearfully went through. Then came the awful clang as the gate closed! We had reached our destination – Bilibid Prison – the "Sing Sing of the Philippines," the place where many men who had fought on Bataan had already died of disease and starvation. We never thought that life could be so primitive and remote."

⁴ Gabi is a Filipino root vegetable.

On the other side of the wall, in another section of the prison, were 800 military prisoners. More and more of the civilian internees were succumbing to the ravages of dysentery and dengue fever. The food rations were steadily decreasing. They could only hope that the approaching American troops would get there in time. One small boy who had never known anything but internment and prison asked: "What does an American soldier look like?"

Finally, their greatest moment came on February 3, 1945, when American soldiers surrounded the walls of the prison. The Yanks had come!

The internment effect on the health of the Bartges was lifelong. During their forced imprisonment, Sara lost a child 7½ months into the pregnancy. In closing, it is appropriate to quote Rev. Bartges as he reflected on the scars of war: "What war does to men's souls is worse than what it does to their bodies."

After finally serving on the mission field, Woodrow continued to follow wherever God led, serving Grace Church in York PA and Albright Memorial in Washington DC for 9 and 13 years respectively – and then, in retirement, as visitation pastor at Yorkshire in York County PA. His obituary⁵ states the following.

Eager to serve Christ in any way he could, Woody served as president of local and denominational ministeriums. He also served as a volunteer hospital chaplain in several communities. Woody was a grief counselor for the Evangelical Hospital. Hospice Program in Lewisburg PA at the time of his death.

The "**Where He Leads Me I Will Follow**" theme was also evident in Sara's life, as affirmed in her obituary⁶ as follows.

During the course of her life, Sara served on many boards and agencies for the General Church and Annual Conference. For many years she wrote Sunday School and Junior Church curriculum material for the Evangelical United Brethren Church. Sara was passionate about children's ministry and enhanced children's programs in every church she served with Woody. At Albright Memorial, Sara founded and directed a Day Care Center for sixteen years. Her work was recognized by religious and civic leaders as she was named Mother of the Year in Washington DC in 1968. She founded and directed Handbell Choirs in Washington DC and York PA.

The complete service record and other information about Rev. Woodrow Bartges is available from the conference archives on-line data base: susumc.org → resources → archives → online databases → Central Pennsylvania Evangelical Pastors.

⁵ *Baltimore-Washington Conference Official Journal*, 1997, pages 635-636.

⁶ *Baltimore-Washington Conference Official Journal*, 2001, pages 607-608.