

From the Archives: Ernest F. Ward: The First Free Methodist Foreign Missionary

Among some of the lesser-known collections of the archives of the B.L. Fisher Library is the story of the first foreign missionary of the Free Methodist Church and his family told through primary documents.¹ Ernest Fremont Ward was born on April 25, 1853 in Illinois. After his conversion on November 14, 1871 he joined the Methodist Episcopal Church, but also took a strong interest in the ideas of sanctification and holiness as relayed in the *Advocate of Christian Holiness* magazine. In an article he wrote in one of his scrapbooks, he relates how he received the blessing of sanctification at a Free Methodist Camp meeting in June of 1878. In 1879, he left the Methodist Episcopal Church and joined the Free Methodist Church, because of what he perceived as a deeper sympathy for holiness teaching.



E.F. Ward, His Wife Phoebe and Their Three Daughters²

In a rather whirlwind approach to ministry and life, Ernest Ward married Phebe Cox (1850-1910) on October 4, 1880 at her father's home in Cary, Illinois and on November 15th, they left for England for some missionary training before going on to Central India, funded by Phebe's savings as a teacher.³ But within those few weeks, Ward also attended the Illinois Conference of the Free Methodist Church in Freeport and was ordained as both a deacon and an elder at the same conference. On January 16, 1881, the newlyweds arrived in Bombay, India. The Wards operated as a faith mission, raising all of their own support. The Wards raised three daughters in India. Daughter Ethel went on to serve as a missionary in India for forty-nine years and a second daughter, Louise died shortly before she was to leave on missionary service to India as well.

MISSIONARY MEETING

There will be a Missionary Meeting

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7:30 P. M.

At Church,

In

To which all are Cordially Invited.

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**ERNEST F. WARD & MRS. PHEBE E. WARD,**

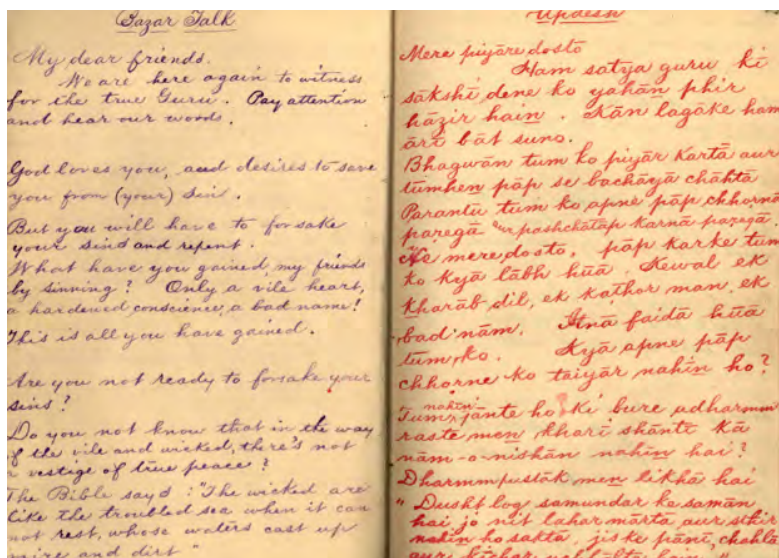
**Who Spent 16 Years Among the Hindoos of**  
**Central India, will give an account of**  
**the People of that Country,**

**Their Manners, Customs, Religions, Etc., Together with their**  
**Experience in Mission Work.**

**The Lecture will be Illustrated by a Large Wall Map of**  
**India, and the Native Costumes will be exhibited**  
**by the Missionaries. The Meeting will be**  
**Enlivened by the Singing of New**  
**Missionary Songs, And also**  
**Hymns in the Native Languages of India.**

Notice for a Missionary Meeting by the Wards about 1897

Yardy<sup>4</sup> writes of their approach to mission, "After learning Hindi, the Wards went to cities with no Christian witness, learned languages and dialects as needed, living and dressing simply. They established five mission stations in central India. They visited in homes, preached, and sold gospel portions in the bazaars-travelling village to village talking with anyone who would listen. Hindu festivals became opportunities for sharing the gospel." The Wards' work also expanded into relief work during a major famine, and E.F. Ward's influence on Narayan Tilak, an Indian poet who wrote around 300 hymns in the Marathi hymnbook.



### A Sermon to be Preached in the Bazaar by Ward, both in English and Translated in an Indian Language.

In one entry in her diary from 1902, Phebe records her visit with Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922) and her renowned Mukti mission. Ramabai was a well-known Indian Christian woman, who fought for women's rights in India especially fighting against child marriage, and rescuing child widows, "fallen" women, orphans, and the sick. Her work established schools and hospitals to help heal and advance the cause of India's women. Phebe Ward writes,

Friday March 28, 1902

Bro. Sherman, Bessie, Louisa and I started at 4:15AM for Khedgaou. Found a S.A. officer, Mr. Lewis, bound for the same place, so we all went together. Ramabai's *tonga*<sup>5</sup> waiting there when we arrived. Only a short ride, and we were in the grounds of the famous Mukti Mission. Everything looked so substantial, from the fine rooms we were ushered in to the great fat bullocks that took us in. Trees and plants everywhere. I saw three ferneries, and there may be many more. I stayed in Miss Abram's room. It was quiet and restful, but the children were curious to see. Louisa and some lingered around the door.

We were quite hungry when a substantial *chibhota bazar*<sup>6</sup> for three was sent in, to which we done justice. A little while after Ramabai came in with Maribai, her head nurse, who piloted us around. My directions were lost as she took us here and there into the great storeroom with the great iron barrels of *javari*<sup>7</sup> and *bajer*<sup>8</sup>, into the room for supplies for the guests, and their cook and dining room for guests, into Ramabai's private room where the picture of her deceased husband hangs, into her brother's widow's room who is living with her, into dormitory after dormitory- system and cleanliness everywhere. Several wards in the hospitals for the Rescue Home girls that had loathsome diseases; a segregated ward for contagious diseases, a fever ward, a sore eye ward, a guinea worm ward, one for weak cases, with one or more matrons over each.

As it is Good Friday and a holiday, there was no work going on in the weaving departments. They have 50 looms for saris, they weave tape for beds, make lace buttons, and I don't remember what all. They think of raising their own cotton and will then make their own thread. They have mills for pressing out oil from seeds and a large dairy business; their butter made daily is very good. The yards are like a park around the large building built of stone near the church.

The church is a large building seating three thousand. It is a long building with two rounding sides capable of holding a large number. They have school in this building. She took me to the small room where they had their first school room- they have prayers there every morning at four with the teachers. At 9:00 AM they had a special service for Good Friday. It was a sight to see that large body of girls and young women in the immense building. The floor is of wood- narrow boards. The pulpit a raised wooden platform, with a seat running around its four sides, which serves for a step for the platform. Bro. Sherman preached in English about the resurrection morning. Bro. Gadre interpreted into Marathi. I was struck with this thought, that those women when they went with the message, Jesus met them. When we are going to preach the Word, Jesus will meet us.

After the service to the sound of singing, those children fell into line and marched out one by one through three doors at a time. It was an impressive sight, file after file to the right, to the left, here and there, back and forth until all were gone—no confusion keeping time to the music. Oh God, bless this mighty institution! Miss McDonald was on the alert to keep the tiny tots in order.

Then we went to breakfast in the guest's dining room, and had the privilege of eating with our fingers if we chose, although spoons and forks were provided. We ate on large brass *talis*<sup>9</sup>. *Dal*<sup>10</sup> in a small basin, *bhat*<sup>11</sup> and *nolkol*<sup>12</sup> with *chapatties*<sup>13</sup>—fresh butter also. A large *lota*<sup>14</sup> of water, with a dish to pour it into, stood beside each place with a deep plate over which we could pour water to wash our hands before we began eating and also afterwards. Each one was provided with a nice seat about four inches high and another one to hold our plate in front. A similar board at the back against the wall was quite helpful to lean on. Ramabai and Mr. Gadre ate with us; probably she with her English workers always eats here. After dinner Bro. Sherman sang, "Who will roll away the stone." Then we rested until after 4:00 PM in our own rooms. They brought us another lunch of cocoa, bread, and butter.

After 4:00 PM Meribai brought the *tonga* again, and we had a pleasant ride through the grounds out to two of her wells. The first one had an abundant supply of water, and of the five wells they had was the best and supplied the drinking and cooking water. Bullocks with *pakals* and *garis*<sup>15</sup> were carrying away water all the time from this beautiful well. In this dry and thirsty land, the size and usefulness of a large well always touches me deeply. On reaching the second well, we saw some distance from the Home; we found an enormous hole in the solid rock very deep. They had been digging for one year and a half, and people prophesied us water! But the stones used in building, dug from this immense pit, justified the outlay and she kept at it, and now they are getting to water, quite a little already in the rocky bottom. It will be such a valuable help to the large track of land lying around it, which belongs to Ramabai. The expense of a wall around it will not be heavy as the rock comes near the top.

From there we drove to the station with a native Christian woman from Ahmednagar who had brought a woman to the Rescue Home and was now going home. She had gone around with us in the morning as we overlooked the premises. Back again to dinner, which we ate with our fingers. Then we all took the train to Poona.



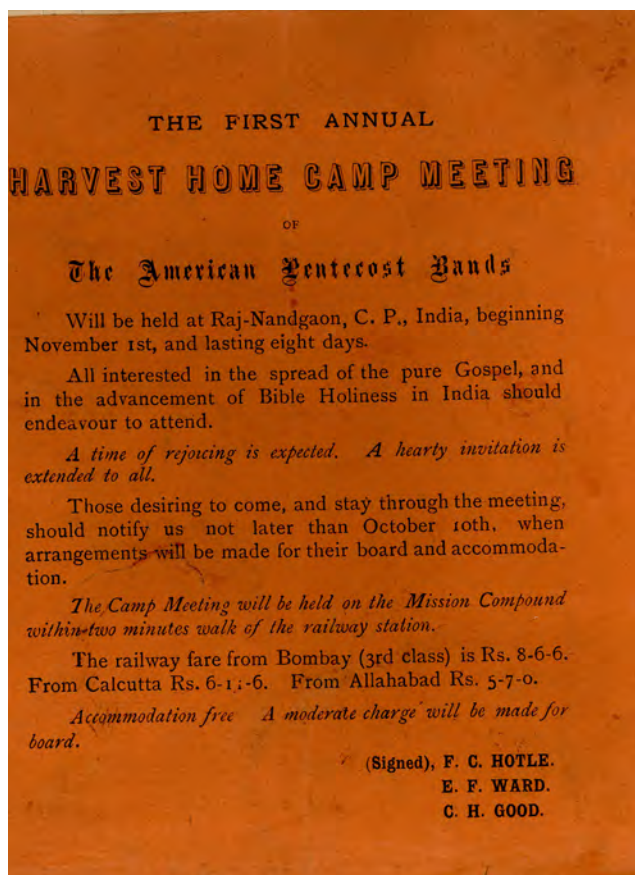
Drawing of Watchtower and Water Buffalo in Ward Diary



Photo of a Hindu Ascetic from a Ward Scrapbook



Ernest and Phebe Ward served as the very first Free Methodist missionaries to India, and indeed as the first foreign missionaries for the entire denomination as well. They served in Burhanpur, Ellichpar, Raj Nangaon, and Yeomtal, as well as a few other minor places. Phebe died while on furlough in Seattle in 1910. Ernest Freemont Ward would die in 1938 after 40 years of missionary service in India. The Ernest F. Ward Collection contains diaries, letters, scrapbooks, and notebooks collected by various members of the family. It is a treasure trove of material revealing early holiness missions to India.



A Flier for a Pentecostal Camp Meeting in India

The archives of the B.L. Fisher library are open to researchers and works to promote research in the history of Methodism and the Wesleyan-Holiness movement. Images, such as these, provide one vital way to bring history to life. Preservation of such material is often time consuming and costly, but are essential to helping fulfill Asbury Theological Seminary's mission. If you are interested in donating items of historic significance to the archives of the B.L. Fisher Library, or in donating funds to help purchase or process significant collections, please contact the archivist at [archives@asburyseminary.edu](mailto:archives@asburyseminary.edu).

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Most images used courtesy of the Archives of the B.L. Fisher Library of Asbury Theological Seminary who own all copyrights to these digital images. Please contact them directly if interested in obtaining permission to reuse these images.

<sup>2</sup> This image comes from the book, *Echoes from Bharatkhand*, by Ernest F. Ward with additional chapters by Phebe E. Ward and Introduction by Rev. W. A. Sellow, published in 1908 by the Free Methodist Publishing house in Chicago. Image in the public domain.

<sup>3</sup> "Going Out: Ernest and Phebe Ward" by Sherrill Yardy in *Free Methodist World Mission People*, July-September 2011, pp. 23.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Or *tanga*, is a light carriage used in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, which is traditionally pulled by a horse and has two-wheels.

<sup>6</sup> *Chhota haazri* was a small traditional meal of northern India during the British Empire, which was served in schools or barracks, usually served shortly after dawn.

<sup>7</sup> A type of sorghum.

<sup>8</sup> Or *bajir* or *bajra*, known in English as pearl millet.

<sup>9</sup> Or *thali*, a type of plate.

<sup>10</sup> A common Indian dish using lentils.

<sup>11</sup> Steamed or boiled rice.

<sup>12</sup> Or *noolkol*, an Indian term for kohlrabi.

<sup>13</sup> Or *chapatis*, are a type of flat, unleavened bread made from wheat.



<sup>14</sup> A small, spherical, brass or copper vessel used to hold water, often for cleaning or ritual purification.

<sup>15</sup> A traditional type of enclosed carriage with four wheels and two seats inside facing each other.