From the Archives: Of Children’s Teeth and Missions: The Papers of Martha R. Jones

Sometimes people ask about the strangest items we might have in the collections of the Archives and Special Collections of the B.L. Fisher Library. We usually respond by talking about the presence of a collection of children’s teeth, found among the Papers of Martha Richardson Jones (1884-1974). 1 While the presence of human teeth might seem odd at first, the story of Martha Jones is one of great determination, creativity, and inspiration.

Some of the Children’s Teeth from the Martha R. Jones Collection
Born June 12, 1884 in Nashville, Martha was motivated by her own illnesses as a child to study the chemistry of food and nutrition at Vanderbilt University and Peabody College. She went on to the Department of Physiological Chemistry at Yale University on a fellowship for doctoral studies. While there, she became the first woman research assistant in the department in 1918, ultimately earning her Ph.D. in 1920. She then went on to do research at the University of California in the Pediatrics Department of their medical school. She focused on studying the effects of acid and alkali in the diet of dogs. In particular she looked at their bones and teeth. She found that too much alkali in the diet softened the layers under the surface of teeth and bones, while too much acid would cause decay of the enamel. While she presented her findings in 1928 at the International Association for Dental Research, her colleagues doubted her findings because they were not proven on human subjects.

A Japanese Sugar Plantation Worker and her Infant
The Developmental Health of Children’s Bones and Teeth were Martha Jones’ Primary Concern
From 1928 to 1963, Martha Jones worked as a research associate at the Queen’s Hospital in Honolulu, Hawaii. Jones focused on the diet of children at Ewa Plantation, where most of the workers were of Filipino or Japanese origin. The Ewa Plantation began in 1890, and by 1923 became the first sugar company in the world to raise ten tons of sugar per acre; by 1933 Ewa Plantation produced over 61,000 tons of sugar a year. The children had high levels of mortality, severe levels of sickness and showed signs of poor bone formation and teeth decay. As she compared this with the children of native Hawaiians (whose children in comparison had good health and excellent teeth and bone formation), she realized that part of the underlying problem was in their diet. The Hawaiian traditional diet of taro, sugar cane, fish, breadfruit, banana, and sweet potato was well balanced between acidic and alkaline sources. In response, she developed a food made of cane syrup, milk and poi (a traditional Hawaiian food of mashed, cooked taro root). She marketed this syrup as Gee-Gee Syrup with the use of characters called the Gee-Gees.
Martha Jones continued to do research on the relationship between diet and dental decay by studying U.S. servicemen at Pearl Harbor Submarine Base and the Navy Academy of Annapolis. Jones established the Martha R. Jones Foundation for Health Education in 1961 at Asbury Theological Seminary, in the hopes that missionaries would take a serious interest in the nutritional and physical needs of the people they were sent to serve, and not just focus on the spiritual needs. Martha R. Jones died on January 21, 1974 at the age of 89, after giving a lifetime of service to the nutritional care of children for their well-being and physical development.
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.

Paper Cutout of the Big Gee-Gee, Used to Market Martha Jones’ Gee-Gee Syrup
End Notes

1 All 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.

2 Most of this information comes from the finding aid for the Papers of Martha R. Jones in the B.L. Fisher Library, located at: http://place.asburyseminary.edu/findingaids/22/.

3 Cf. http://www2.hawaii.edu/~speccoll/p_ewa.html. This is the finding aid for the Register for the Ewa Plantation Company, which is held by the Hawaiian Sugar Planters’ Association Plantation Archives. Retrieved 7/6/2018.