



Missionary Irene
Wakeham Lee shares
wisdom, wit, and
warm-hearted stories

105 & Counting

From the moment I learned about Irene Wakeham Lee, I wanted to meet her. She was born in 1912, the year the RMS *Titanic* sunk, was in Hawaii when Pearl Harbor was bombed, and had dedicated most of her life to serving others overseas. At 105, she is walking history, her life rich with stories.

When I visited Irene at her country home, I found her editing a book. She was tall and lean, with pale blue eyes that radiated intelligence, strength, and kindness. Her handshake was firm, her mind sharp, and her wit delightful.

I sat down beside her and listened intently as she shared memories of serving the Lord she loves, memories that I'd like to share with you.

Laurie: When did you decide that you wanted to be a missionary?

Irene: I wanted to be a missionary for as long as I can remember. Mission work was a tradition in my family. My father had served in Egypt, my mother in England, and my two older sisters in Africa and Brazil.

I spent my childhood on the Michigan campus of Emmanuel

Missionary College (EMC), now Andrews University, surrounded by missionaries on furlough. I listened to their stories with great interest and read as many mission books as I could. In those days, the common conception was that if you were really consecrated and wanted to serve the Lord, you'd go overseas to be a missionary. That's what I wanted to do!

Laurie: What was life like for you as a child?

Irene: We didn't have indoor plumbing in our house, and we used an outhouse. I can remember when we got electricity. When we visited my grandmother in Wisconsin, we went to church in a horse and buggy, and when it got dark, they lit kerosene lamps. I was around 13 the first time I used a telephone.

Laurie: Where did you serve?

Irene: When I was in my late 20s, I sailed to Hawaii from my home in California to teach at Hawaiian Mission Academy. It's hard to imagine now, but Hawaii was considered a mission field in those days. Most of my students were non-Adventists, so the academy was a real mission school. While there, I witnessed the attack on Pearl Harbor and continued to teach throughout the war. [See Irene's story, "Life Interrupted," on page 20].

In 1946, I learned that faculty were urgently needed to rehabilitate Philippine Union College (PUC) after the war, so I volunteered to go. I wanted the pioneering life! Later, I taught at Mountain View College, which is also in the Philippines. I also taught at Oakwood College and Antillian College in the United States.

Laurie: Did you see anyone's life significantly change while you were a missionary?

Irene: Yes, the life of a young man named Filmo, a former student

of mine in the Philippines. Filmo came from a family with a long military tradition. His family became Adventists when he was young, and Filmo chose to be baptized. He loved Jesus, but when he went to live with non-Adventist relatives in order to attend high school, he became careless about his conversion.

After he graduated, Filmo was conscripted for military service. He was captured and forced to participate in the infamous death march and serve as a prisoner of war. In prison, he met a soldier who had a Bible. Filmo asked to borrow it, but the man refused because he used a page or two a day for toilet paper. When the soldier died shortly after, Filmo read the Bible and became closer to God than he'd ever been. But it didn't last.

Eventually, Filmo was released with the stipulation that as soon as he recovered his strength, he'd be put in the Japanese army. He narrowly escaped, finding passage aboard a ship going to his home island. Just before the ship reached land, there was a terrible typhoon. Filmo pled for God's protection and safely reached home where he joined the guerrilla forces.

It was during one of his encounters with the Japanese invaders that he met an Adventist family. They inspired Filmo to continue his education at PUC after the war ended. His ambition was still along military lines. He was initially selected by the government to be sent to the United States for further training, but he was disqualified on one point: he needed at least 60 hours of college credit. So Filmo came to PUC.

At PUC, Filmo was treated kindly by the faculty and students, and he renewed his commitment to God. What the Lord in His mercy tried to do but

could not on the battlefield, in the prison camp, or on a stormy sea, He accomplished through the steady, day-by-day influence of a Christian college. This helped me realize that we were really making a difference in many of our students' lives.

Laurie: Were there times when you experienced God's protection?

Irene: His protection was evident all the time. Many times, our vehicles broke down, and God rescued us. One time, just as I had gotten out of a jeep without looking carefully enough, a car came whizzing along. If it had had another coat of paint, it would have hit me!

Once, when I was teaching at Mountain View College, a swarm of locusts was about to descend on our cornfield ripe for harvest. The students had asked me to join the faculty in praying that our food would be spared. While I walked to the chapel to join them, I heard the buzz of a plane. It was a government plane coming to spray the locusts. The pilot told me later that it was his day off, but he had been impressed to do everything he could to save our crop. The Lord had started to solve our problem before we even prayed!

Then there was the time I was robbed. I

had just made a purchase from a street vendor in Manila when a man grabbed my wallet and ran. I chased him, and then a van filled with young people who had seen what happened picked me up, and we followed him. When we reached the thief, the police had already caught him. They gave me my wallet back, and the next day, the man's family begged me not to press charges. I forgave him. He must have been an amateur.

Laurie: How did you meet your husband?

Irene: Mountain View College urgently needed someone to upgrade its ministerial training program from a two-year to a four-year degree, and James Lee was hired for the job. He and his wife, Marguerite, moved from South Korea, where James had been born and served as a missionary for years. I was the registrar as well as an English teacher, so I worked with James to create the curriculum.

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On Sabbath afternoons, James and Marguerite hiked with the ministerial students to nearby villages, where the men would preach, and the women would teach the children songs and tell them stories. I often accompanied them on these excursions, and we became good friends. Eventually, we were able to start quite a few churches this way.

Later, the Lees and I returned to California to care for our aging parents. During this time, Marguerite passed away, and I received several requests from the General Conference to return to mission service. After my mother's death, I reported that I was ready to serve, but James had other plans.

He invited me to the wild animal park in San Diego to see the creatures in their natural habitats. I would say to James, "Look at that lion with its big paws," or "Look at the giraffe with its long neck." He turned to me and said sweetly, "I have found a deer." That's when it started. That was our first date. We were married when we were both 70 years old and enjoyed 30 happy years together.

Laurie: What were some of your rewarding experiences?

Irene: There are many. One was seeing the first graduation of the four-year ministerial students. I felt that we were really supplying the field with something that was badly needed.

It was my privilege to leave the Philippines having trained half a dozen English teachers with master's degrees. They then taught at new colleges that started after I returned to the States.

Another precious experience was when, after a year of hard work on the part of students and teachers at PUC, 19 Japanese prisoners of war were baptized at the school baptistry. The men started the Sabbath day by joining us for Sabbath School and church accompanied by their armed guards. They were served dinner in the college cafeteria and then listened to another sermon before the baptismal ceremony.

Hundreds of spectators had gathered about the outdoor baptismal font and watched quietly as the candidates took their places. In spite of the bitterness against the Japanese that most Filipinos still felt, there was a spirit of sincere Christian fellowship during the ceremony. Fourteen of the prisoners were under sentence

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A Tribute to a Faithful Teacher

"Few missionaries who have served in the Far Eastern Division [now Southern Asia-Pacific Division] have made a greater contribution or have touched more lives than has Dr. Irene Wakeham. For more than 24 years, she was a teacher, counselor of students and friend to many students and faculty at Mountain View College and Philippine Union College. . . .

"The contribution she has made is more, however, than merely teaching young people how to express themselves in the English language. She did this well. . . . But far greater has been her spiritual influence upon hundreds of Filipino young people. As they sat in her classes and saw a teacher who reflected the Master Teacher, their lives were changed. They loved her. They enjoyed being with her. They would come to her home or go on trips with her, for it was fun and comfortable to be with Dr. Wakeham" (B. E. Olson, "A Tribute to a Faithful Teacher," *Far Eastern Division Outlook*, March 1971, p. 14).



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of death. Although some of the men had known a little about Christianity before the war, not one had ever become a member of any Christian church.

After their baptism, the men climbed into their truck, the guards took their places, and, as the audience sang “Blest Be the Tie That Binds” and “God Be With You Till We Meet Again,” they returned to the prison to await the execution of their sentences.

Laurie: Why do you think you've lived such a long, healthy life?

Irene: I get asked that question a lot! I attribute my longevity to good genes and the good fortune of being born into a Seventh-day Adventist family who taught me the principles of a healthy lifestyle. I've also chosen to be reasonably conscientious about keeping healthy. And lastly, I've always had a warm relationship with God that has relieved me of so much stress. I've been able to roll my burdens on the Lord. He's awake all night anyway. I might as well let Him take care of them!



By **Laurie Falvo**, Office of Adventist Mission.

Photos courtesy of Irene Wakeham Lee; the Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research; Mountain View College; and Philippine Union College.



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- 1 Irene's daily routine includes time with Jesus, exercise, fresh air, and helping her family with the responsibilities of everyday life.
- 2 Irene met these women from the Manobo tribe on a trip into a remote area of the Philippines for a school dedication.
- 3 Irene (front row, third from right) with Mountain View College faculty and students in 1954.
- 4 Irene became a centenarian in June 2012. Her husband, James, turned 100 in September, and they celebrated their 30th wedding anniversary a few days later.
- 5 Irene and James, both 70, were married September 26, 1982.
- 6 Japanese prisoners of war baptized at Philippine Union College.
- 7 On her 105th birthday, Irene attended her church's Pathfinder Day, where she surprised everyone by wearing her handmade Pathfinder Master Guide dress and sash from 1932.
- 8 Irene spends hours editing and proofreading books written by her husband, James, and her stepson, David. So far, she has completed about 50 books and booklets.
- 9 Irene's family in Tennessee: Veronica and Moises Miller and David and Anne Lee.

Irene Wakeham Lee
will turn 106 on June 28!
Brighten her day by sending her a
birthday card or note to the address
or email below, and we'll make sure
she gets them.

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UNITED STATES

Friday, December 5, 1941, was boat day in Honolulu, Hawaii.

A white Matson liner would round Koko Head, then Diamond Head, and then pull up to the dock in the morning with its load of vacationers. They would disembark at the Aloha Tower to the strains of “Aloha Oe” and the fragrant leis of tourist guides. I remember how the haunting melody, played on steel guitars, brought tears to my eyes when I first landed on the island of Oahu to teach at the local Adventist school.

Long before mail went by air, we needed to get our Christmas greetings on their way early. If we took them to the post office Friday morning, they would go out on the Matson liner Friday night when it returned to California, and they would reach our mainland friends before Christmas.

On Thursday evening, I, along with the three other single female teachers I lived with, wrote Christmas cards about how beautiful

and peaceful Honolulu was that balmy December. We knew, of course, about talks going on in Washington, DC, with Japanese envoys: the usual brinkmanship that nations play with one another. Someone would blink first, we reasoned. No one in their right mind wanted war. There was enough of that going on in Europe.

On Sabbath morning, December 6, I started to climb the rim of Punchbowl, a burned-out crater a mile or two from Hawaiian Mission Academy, to watch the sunrise. I decided to take a shortcut, scrambling through brush up the steep slope. Just before I reached the top, a soldier armed with a rifle ordered me to stop. “You can’t come up here!” he shouted.

“Can I come if I go around by the road?”

“No!” he insisted. “Off-limits to all civilians.”

Earlier in the week, I had seen sentries guarding a lot of the intersections. Something about a

military alert scheduled to end at midnight Saturday night.

After church, a few of us had a picnic lunch at the beach. We could hear the gentle lapping of the waves on the sandy shore and the rustling of the palm leaves in the trees. The slightly fishy smell of the ocean mingled with the aroma of our picnic food.

Taken by surprise

Sunday morning was the usual time for army maneuvers on Oahu. We were used to hearing military noises and thought nothing of the distant boom of artillery. While doing the breakfast dishes, one of my roommates remarked, “I wish they’d take their war farther away. They’re making too much noise.”

As I walked across the tiny park separating our home from the academy to grade papers in my classroom, I noticed a lot of black specks in the sky. I remember thinking, *They’re wasting an*



Irene Wakeham

Lee is a retired writer and missionary schoolteacher who lives in Tennessee, United States.

LIFE INTERRUPTED



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awful lot of ammunition in their games today.

I looked forward to seeing how my students had performed on a test I had given on Friday. They were a mixed group: the majority Japanese, some Chinese, a few Koreans, Filipinos, and Hawaiians. I was teaching both English and French, and for many of them, English was a foreign language.

Fresh from southern California, where automatic respect for the teacher wasn't so much a part of the culture, even in those long-ago days, I reveled in my relationship with the Asians. They were taught at home to prize the chance to learn, to honor the teacher, and to appreciate the privilege of an education. I looked forward to giving a lot of high marks on their papers.

Reaching the academy, I found the faculty men gathered to pray for protection. They told me to go home and stay inside. Unexploded shells, fired wildly in the excitement by United States (US) armed forces, were falling back on the city and killing people within three blocks of where we lived.

I raced home, turned on the radio, and heard that the rising-sun emblem had been spotted on the wings of the attacking planes. A little later, some of the faculty were working on a ditch for a sewer line just outside my window. Among them was our beloved teacher of special English, Richard Gima. We had many students born under the American flag but sent to Japan by their parents for a Japanese education. On their return, they had to learn English, and Richard taught them so well that they always scored high on standardized tests. He was born a few months before his parents immigrated

to Hawaii, so he grew up in the American culture of the islands but remained a Japanese citizen.

As he joined the group, I heard him ask, "What country is attacking us?" He must have had the wistful hope that some other country was responsible.

"Japan," Principal Frank Rice told him. From that moment on, Richard knew he would be considered an "enemy alien."

The actual blackout that went into effect that night was no darker than the figurative one that fouled relationships between ethnic Japanese, even those loyal to the United States, and many Americans on the mainland. Some forgot the longstanding friendship with Japan and turned against people who were as lovable as ever.

Prayers for faith

At school, the Week of Prayer had just begun. That Sunday evening, in the gloom of the blackout, we carefully found our way across the little park to the principal's home. Using a flashlight in the darkened room, he read a selection from *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* [now *Adventist Review*]. On our lonely island, 2,000 miles from the mainland and wide open to enemy attack, we took courage from the assurance that God was still in charge. We were there doing His work for our students, many of them non-Christians.

Before another Sabbath, the beach we had picnicked on was crisscrossed with a maze of barbed wire. Instead of white Matson liners, we saw camouflaged warships of all kinds, rushed from the mainland to replace the sunken

wrecks lying at the bottom of Pearl Harbor.

Severe military discipline was meted out to the top US officers who should have been responsible for preventing a surprise attack, but nothing could bring back the thousands who had needlessly died.

The US military didn't believe it could happen, and it wasn't prepared.

My memories of that Sunday morning came back to me in a rush as I watched the reports of the terrorist attacks on a beautiful Tuesday morning in September 2001. The event reminded me

"We took courage from the assurance that God was still in charge."

that there are very few certainties in life. In a heartbeat, our lives can be changed irrevocably by circumstances far beyond our control.

We can be truly prepared for life-changing tragedies only when our characters are anchored to Christ by our faith in Him. When we are called to experience the unexpected, our faith will have to carry us. It's all we can hold on to.

Your weekly mission offerings and world budget offerings help support the ministry of more than 400 missionary families.