

Donald Covil Gordon
Medical Missionary

Doctor, surgeon, founder and builder of a growing hospital, Casa de Saude Evangelica, in Rio Verde, State of Goiaz, Brasil, tremendous energy and an abiding faith while serving under the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions.

This intermediate point in his already crowded life's work would never have been reached or even begun had it not been for the determination of the parents to give their children, Donald among them, the best education which they could afford even though it meant sacrifice of material things for themselves. Seven children, all of them to receive education beyond high school, of whom six graduated from college, testified to the realization of those dreams.

As the fifth child, he was born January 24, 1897 in Hazardville, Connecticut. He early showed traits which have served him in such good stead - honesty, initiative, alertness, friendliness and a sense of humor. After graduating from grammar school in Hazardville, he went on to the Enfield High School in Thompsonville, Connecticut, from which he was graduated as valedictorian of his class in June 1915.

He entered Wesleyan University at Middletown, Connecticut that Fall, where he joined the Beta Theta Pi Fraternity. Leaving Wesleyan at the end of his junior year, he took a summer course at Harvard College. That Fall he entered Harvard Medical School as a freshman, and after completing his first year, he took a summer course at the University of Pittsburgh, thus completing requirements for a B.A. degree. He returned in June 1920 to be graduated with his class at Wesleyan as of the Class of 1919, and to receive election to the Phi Beta Kappa Society.

After a summer vacation, the first in three years, he continued his course at Harvard Medical School, where he was graduated in June 1922. Out of a hundred and thirty who took the two National Board examinations following graduation he was second highest in one, seventeenth in the other in the United States. Twenty-eight states had legislatively agreed that if entrants passed these examinations, they would be qualified to practice in any or all of these states. The final and third examination of the National Board could not be taken until his internship in a hospital had been completed. From a number of hospitals which offered him this opportunity, he chose the Hartford Hospital, Hartford, Connecticut, where he stayed for twenty months. From various sources within, word emanated that he was one of the finest internes it had ever had. He was now a full fledged doctor.

The question of how he chose the course he pursued originated during his Sophomore year at Wesleyan University. At the end of the first year, he attended a Christian Conference at Northfield, where the challenge of foreign missionary work was presented. Months later, after much thinking and praying, came the decision to dedicate his life to medical missionary work. From that decision he never wavered; his course was set. In 1921 he met Miss Helen Gary, a student at Wellesley College, who was sailing that autumn for missionary work in Bolivia. Correspondence continued, friendship flourished and proposal of marriage and acceptance by cable took place in 1923. In 1924 he sailed for the British-American Hospital at Callao, Peru, South America. He came back to the States to be married at Wellesley College Chapel, Wellesley, Massachusetts to Helen on November 1, 1924. They then returned to Callao, (Peru) to the British-American hospital to continue his work.

Both he and his life partner learned the Spanish language - she began her language study in Wellesley College and increased her proficiency in Bolivia and Chile; he learned Spanish while working in Peru and took the medical examination at San Marco University in Lima, thus securing a medical diploma for practice in Peru. It was with a feeling of regret and disappointment that they both eventually reached the conclusion that the spirit of the hospital seemed to be growing away from Missionary Evangelism and toward commercialism. Unwilling to live so far from home to do work that any surgeon might do even though many inducements, including increased salary, were offered to him, they decided to return to the United States while choosing another field.

While awaiting a call to return to South America, necessity led him to accept a place as assistant surgeon in private hospital at Elkins, West Virginia - still eager, however, to find real missionary work. Recognizing his ability, the Chief Surgeon left for an extended and needed vacation, leaving him in complete charge.

Finally the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions notified him that it was willing to send him to Brazil, South America. He accepted. And thereupon began the most difficult, prolonged, exhausting and discouraging period of his whole career.

He found great difficulty in re-validating his medical diploma in Brazil. A diploma from Harvard Medical School; passing the National Board examinations entitling him to practice in twenty-eight states; another validation in West Virginia where separate exams had been required; a graduation certificate from the San Marco University in Peru - not one or all of these were enough to satisfy the Brazilian authorities. He had to start at the very beginning - learn the Portuguese language, take examinations in Portuguese, History of Brazil, and Geography of Brazil, in the secondary school, and pass nineteen examinations in the medical school, i.e. all the examinations of the subjects in the last three years, of the six year course. Every obstacle, stemming both from political disturbances and religious hostility, seemed to be placed in his way to prevent him from reaching his goal - that of starting a hospital in that country. Eventually under tremendous handicaps the hospital venture was begun at Rio Verde, State of Goiaz. Courage - so much - was needed. Between him and his loyal wife and with their prayers and faith in God, they went to work with meager facilities in a rented building in this town of 3,000 at a distance of two hundred and fifty miles from the nearest railroad.

Dr. Walter Clothier of the Presbyterian Board, visiting them a few years later reported, "I didn't see how the missionary doctor, his wife, one national doctor, three graduate nurses and nine student nurses could work and attend to 1,000 new patients each year without forever stepping on each other's toes." Helen, his wife, had first been trained by Dr. Gordon as nurse, who in turn had conducted the nurses' training school.

Of the early struggle to keep that frail enterprise from collapsing, no story is more revealing than the remarks of Dr. Duarte, a Brazilian doctor, to Dr. Gordon two years after joining the hospital staff. Said he, "I knew that you needed me that day you first interviewed me - you fell asleep three times."

A home, a real hospital, and a church they envisioned. They now have a home, a thirty-bed hospital, room for other work, and a building for an out-patient department. These buildings were completed piecemeal with provision for expansion when the means became available. No skilled labor was obtainable, nor could they have afforded it had there been. Aside from a gift of \$2,000 for an X-ray and \$2,000 from an out-patient building and more recently a gift of \$15,000, Dr. Gordon had to finance most improvements from earnings from patients, act as architect, engineer and contractor, besides chief surgeon, doctor and superintendent of the existing hospital.

Much charity work is done, and the usual consulting fee was \$1.00, in recent years increased to \$1.50.

He has performed all kinds of operations. Knowledge of his competence has spread for hundreds of miles. An instance of the wideness of his reputation was shown when a man with a strangulated and gangrenous hernia was brought in on a stretcher borne by two of his relatives after several days of almost continuous travel. Dr. Gordon at first was doubtful if he could save the man's life. It was a touch and go affair for days, but finally a gradual improvement was noted and the man recovered. Without exaggeration Dr. Gordon is the most capable person in his field over a wide expanse of that Brazilian interior.

The church has been started, but even in its unfinished state serves a Sunday school with an average attendance of over 250 with classes for all ages. It has been difficult for the South Americans to appreciate the fact that a building can be a church without a cathedral-like appearance. But as construction nears completion, the members are taking great pride in it.