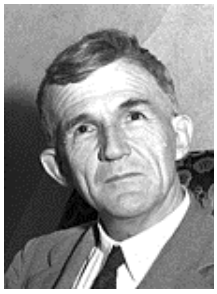
Dr. Paul W. Harrison 1883-1962

Apostle to Central Arabia



Marvin Harrison, Paul's father, heard D. L. Moody speak when he was a student at Chicago Theological Seminary. He volunteered for mission work and in 1881 the Congregational Home Mission Society sent him and his bride, Caroline, out to Nebraska.

There, in the pioneer town of Schriber, Paul and his brother John were born. Paul was a sickly child but survived his childhood diseases and grew up to be a boy with amazing energy. The family grew to seven with the arrival of a daughter and two more sons. It was a challenge to bring up a family in Schriber. Caroline was a schoolteacher by training and so in the evenings she supplemented the lessons from the local school with the wonders of arithmetic and geography.

To young Paul religion was as natural as the air he breathed. He made a personal commitment to Christ aged eleven. He expected to be a minister like his father. The school in Schriber only had 11 grades so for his last year of school he attended Franklin Academy. One evening someone from the Student Volunteer Movement gave a talk to the teenagers about the need for trained workers in other parts of the world. Paul thought about this and asked himself if there was any reason why he should not go. Was God calling him? Next day he signed the Student Volunteer Movement Card.

Paul went on to Doane College in Crete, Nebraska. He continued to think of the future. If he was going to some needy place in the world he should be trained in some useful skill – "a tool in His hand". He soon concluded that the "tool" should be medicine. This meant a transfer to the University of Nebraska for science courses. His two years in Lincoln passed quickly. Paul's mother persuaded him to take his medical training in John Hopkins in Baltimore. A small inheritance had come from her family. She insisted Paul use it, "***It is for the Lord***", she said, "***He deserves the best***".

Paul gave everything he had to his studies. There was so much to enthral and excite him. But he knew he must give equal attention to his "inner life". He woke each morning in time to study the Bible for an hour before starting his heavy schedule.

On graduation in 1909 he took an internship for two years at Massachusetts General Hospital. Despite invitations from eminent surgeons to join their teams, he continued to focus on needy places in God's world. A few years earlier he had met Samuel Zwemer in Baltimore. Samuel had invited him to join the work he had recently pioneered in Arabia. He said, "***Arabia has the worst climate, the most difficult language, the neediest people and offers the least chance for success.***" Paul knew Arabia was the place for him. He appeared before the Board of Foreign Missions of the Reformed Church of America and was duly accepted. He made a farewell visit to his parents in Schriber. By this time his brother John was working as an engineer in the Philippines. His sister, Grace, and her husband were in Lincoln and his brothers Henry and Clinton were both away at university. The farewell party gathered at the station. His father's parting words were, "***Now you belong to Arabia. God bless you.***" That was the last time he saw his mother she died during his first term on the field.

In 1910 the Arabian Gulf was one of the least known places on earth. Paul crossed the Atlantic on S.S. Berlin and entered the Mediterranean bound for Naples. There he caught an Italian steamer that sailed through the Suez Canal and the Red Sea and then east to Bombay. There he boarded a small ship belonging to the British India Steam Navigation Company that made round trips to Mesopotamia and back. The S.S. Kola was manned by British officers and Indian crew. The captain asked Paul where he was going. On learning that it was Basra he said, "***Well, you have something ahead of you!***"

They stopped at two ports on the Indian coast and setting course due west sailed along the southern coast of Baluchistan calling at tiny ports and anchoring offshore while they waited for boats to arrive with their passengers and cargo. Their first stop on the Arabian coast was the rocky harbour of Muscat. A storm stopped him going ashore to meet the members of the Arabian Mission who were there. One day's journey north of Muscat they passed through the Straits of Hormuz where in 1622 the English and Persians defeated the Portuguese expelling them from the Gulf.



Muscat Fort

It was March when Paul reached Basra. As the boat docked two men were waving to him – his future colleagues James Moerdyk and Gerrit Pennings. His first task was to learn Arabic. There was a Bible shop and a small clinic manned by doctors Lankford and Emma Worrall. They had almost no equipment and used the river for a water supply, but this was the only place with any medical help. Basra was a sprawling city of broken walls and filthy streets. By now they had been 400 years under Turkish rule.

A new hospital was being built with Jim overseeing it. Soon John van Ess arrived. He was a great historian. Paul learned that there had been a sophisticated irrigation system but it had been destroyed by the Mongols when Hulagu Khan, grandson of Genghis Khan, sacked Baghdad in 1258.

Paul was determined to learn Arabic. He believed he could only do this if he went to live in a place where he heard only Arabic. He moved to the small town of Amara and lived the life of an Arab.

At the annual meeting of mission workers in Bahrain Paul was amazed at all that was going on in the three centres and at the great faith and expectation in spite of no tangible results. Dr. Sharon Thoms and his family were going on furlough and there was no one to replace them in Muscat. After long discussions because of his need to focus on language study for another year, Paul was assigned there. On arrival he went to pay his respects to the Sultan – Sayyid Faisal. He went to live and work in Mutrah. Muscat was locked in by a ridge of high rocks and was only accessible by sea so Dr. Thoms had established the work in Mutrah as there was a road out into the desert as well as a market and the port for the whole province.

After three months dividing his time between language study and medical work, Paul made a tour of the province as they had heard of many sick. He was warmly welcomed by the Arabs of Oman. As a doctor he soon gained respect. Medicine to deaden pain made him a miracle worker. He perfected a technique with spinal anaesthesia. One of the worst problems he encountered was bad teeth. On one day Paul pulled 83 teeth!!

Medical science was very primitive in Bahrain. Disease was thought to be due to bad smells, the evil eye and jinn. All kinds of complaints were treated by branding. In one area Paul was able to stop a cholera epidemic by getting the local chief to lay down the law. Everyone was to do three things:

- boil water before drinking
- eat nothing that had not been cooked
- cover food away from the flies

Paul was struck by the hospitality and extreme friendliness of the people everywhere he went.

He was asked by the mission to spent two months in Kuwait. There he found a very different situation. Sheikh Mubarak received them with cool civility. Their only real welcome came from the bedouin. After two months, when they went to say goodbye to the sheik, he said, **"I have been watching your work here among us and it has been good. I give permission for you to return whenever it is convenient for you to do so and may Allah go with you."**

Mission rules required Paul to take a vacation every two years. He decided to use it to get a Turkish medical diploma. Without this he could not practice in Arab provinces that were under Turkish



Bedouin Camp

control. Exams for this were only conducted in Turkish and French. He had forgotten most of his college French, but thought he could re-learn it in a Paris hospital. He started his journey to France.

He arrived in Baghdad hoping to join the Turkish mail camel caravan to Damascus. He began two days crossing the desert. From there he went on to Beirut where he caught a steamer to Constantinople followed by a trans-Europe train to Paris. Every morning he worked in an eye clinic and every afternoon he studied French. After 4 weeks he was ready to go back to Constantinople and sit for the exam. It was quickly arranged and he passed.

On his return sea voyage to Beirut he made friends with a Jewish doctor who was returning to Baghdad. This new friend was able to help him study Arabic as they travelled to Baghdad together. Paul's new assignment was to open a permanent work in Kuwait with Edwin and Eleanor Calverley. The ruler had agreed to sell the mission a piece of land for a hospital. The bedouin were the first to come for treatment. Slowly others came. Paul was amazed at their acceptance of 'Allah's will' in cases where no medical help was possible.

Eleanor made a great impact visiting the women in their homes. Most had never left the home since marriage. Edwin gathered a group of young boys and began to teach them English. In January 1913 they received the sad news of the death of Dr. Sharon Thoms. He had fallen from a pole while stringing a telephone wire to connect his home with that of Mr Barny in Muscat. He is buried beside Bishop Valpy French and George Stone in a small cove between Muscat and Sidab used as a Christian cemetery and accessed only by sea.

Paul would have loved to go to Mutrah to replace Dr. Thoms but the mission asked him to take over the medical work in Bahrain. The Zwemers had moved to Cairo to work with the Nile Mission Press. Paul worked hard to keep the hospital going in Bahrain. But day by day he thought of the great closed inland of central Arabia.

He decided to write to Ibn Saud ruler of the Nejd and ask if he could go in to treat their sick. Eventually he received an invitation from the governor of the coastal town of Qatif.

Gerrit and Josephine van Peursem and their baby daughter Gertrude went with him. They set out in sailboats with supplies and some hospital helpers. During their first week in Qatif 200 men, women and children came each day to the makeshift clinic. Qatif had the worst malaria Paul had ever seen. Before long Paul was called to the governor's office and told that they must stop praying publicly each morning or they must close the work and leave the city. They felt they could not compromise. After six weeks they returned to Bahrain. Paul was sick with malaria contracted in Qatif. He went to recuperate in the drier climate of Baghdad.

In November 1914 the Arabian Mission met in Muscat to celebrate its 25th anniversary. The report of that time notes: **"The quarter century has seen the growth of the mission originally consisting of two young men, Samuel Zwemer and James Cantine, to a force of 30 men and women who continue consecrated to the original purpose of occupying Arabia for Christ."**

Returning to their stations they learned that Turkey had declared war on the Allies and the British force had already occupied Basra.

His first five-year term in Arabia complete, Paul arrived back in the USA in the summer of 1915. His mother had died a few years earlier but his father was still preaching and teaching in Scribner, Nebraska. He enjoyed some weeks staying in his old home. He had a schedule of meetings to take for the mission. In the winter he was seconded to the Student Volunteer Movement and thoroughly enjoyed sharing the needs of Arabia in colleges, universities and medical schools.

Paul was convinced that he needed time for medical study. The Mission Board finally agreed. While working in the Union Protestant Infirmary in Baltimore, Paul met Regina Rabbe – a student nurse. Their friendship blossomed. She already had a call to missions. They agreed to marry before Paul's

return to the field. They married on November 7, 1916 in Maryland and almost immediately started for the West Coast and their long trip to Arabia.



Arab Camel Corps

On arrival in Bahrain early 1917 Paul found many changes. Disturbing news was filtering through from central Arabia about a growing sect called 'Ikhwan' (brothers). Ibn Saud had created this to try to bring unity among his warring tribes. In place of tribal loyalties he gave them the law of the Quran.

Paul wrote to Ibn Saud asking permission to go and care for the sick in his land. In August he received a reply inviting him to Riyadh. Paul received permission from the British Consul. Only one hospital boy, Ali, was willing to go with him. After an arduous camel trek of four days they arrived in Riyadh. They enjoyed the hospitality and protection of Ibn Saud and were able to treat many of those who came despite their suspicion of 'infidels'. In twenty days they had used all the medicines they had brought. Ibn Saud assured them he would call for them again.

In his mission report for the year 1917 Paul wrote, **"It has been a year of war. All of Arabia is being profoundly changed, but Mesopotamia, the seat of the actual hostilities, has been utterly transformed. There is a spirit of commercialism that fills the atmosphere. The grip of Islam is paralysed in the face of it. Some surprising results are already evident. There is more tolerance. But the reason is that the present war has made the Muslim believe that all religions are equally futile in the face of selfishness and lust for power. However, in spite of wars and rumours of wars, God has seen fit to show His power in Arabia as never before. The prayers of many years are being answered in the opening of the inland country to the Gospel."**

In December 1918 a 'flu epidemic struck central Arabia. Ibn Saud sent for Paul. He left for Riyadh at once. From the city's population of 10,000, one tenth had already died. Ibn Saud had lost his eldest son and his favourite wife. On Paul's way back to Bahrain he spent two weeks in Hofuf where he did 50 operations.

Paul Jr. was born November 11, 1918. On their next furlough in the summer of 1921 Clinton was born. Once again Paul spent time speaking in colleges and universities for the Student Volunteer Movement. On their return to Bahrain Dorothy was born. Paul had made up his mind to try and re-open the medical work in Oman that had been closed since the death of Dr. Thoms in 1913. Eventually he persuaded the mission and they agreed to assign the Harrisons to Oman. They rented a house. The first floor was a hospital and the second floor was their home.

In the summer of 1928 Paul went to Iraq to study bilharzia since it was so prevalent among the Marsh Arabs. He spent some days with his colleague Henry Bilkert in Basra. Little did he know that a few months later Henry would be murdered on the desert road from Basra to Kuwait. The mission archives record, **"On Monday, January 21, 1929 a two car cavalcade was ambushed in the desert by a small party of 'Ikhwan' marksman and Bilkert was mortally wounded. He received a bullet through the shoulder that severed his spine, paralysing him. The cars sped back over the rough desert to Basra but he died before they arrived."**

This was the first of a number of losses suffered by the mission in the next two years including the death of Paul's own wife Regina, lost at sea in the Gulf of Aden. Paul returned to the USA with his four children in the summer of 1931. Later that same year Paul married Anna, Henry's widow, and they returned to Oman. A new hospital was being built in Mutrah as well as a new house for them. They moved in a year later.
Slowly, as the medical work coupled with evangelism progressed, one after another turned to Christ and a small group of believers began to emerge. The first ones were not Omanis but rather Baluch who had been living in Oman as well as Bahrainis who had come to Oman with Paul. Slowly others were drawn in.



Arabian Mission 1929

After another furlough they returned to Arabia again in April 1941. Central Arabia was still on Paul's heart. He wrote a letter to the Governor of Hasa, who he had known before, offering his services. He was overjoyed to receive a letter inviting him back in. They gathered a small group and set off the next day by truck for the city of Hasa. At one point the truck got stuck in the sand and while the men were digging it out Anna walked up to a ridge and gazed across the desert. She later wrote, **"I looked down upon a scene that took my breath away. Sand dunes of unearthly beauty filled the valley. In the silence they seemed like sculptured forms left by an unseen hand. There Paul found me later and I watched his eyes take in the scene. 'It speaks of God, doesn't it?' He whispered."**

On arrival they found that the governor had prepared everything for their visit. A guesthouse was ready for them with a building next door that could be made into a hospital. They went to work at once with a constant flow of patients. Some they could help and others were beyond their help. Their time in Hasa came to a sudden end one day when the Governor received a telegram from King Ibn Saud requesting Paul to go to Riyadh. They left immediately camping two nights in the desert on the way. On arrival Paul went to pay his respects to Ibn Saud and was asked to treat his daughter who was suffering from trachoma. The treatment was given and she recovered well. As on previous visits many bedouin flocked to the clinic they had set up. Anna wrote later, **"Paul described the struggles of each day as if he enjoyed them. Nothing ever upset or discouraged him."**

There were many changes in Riyadh. The King had his own radio station and a man to translate English broadcasts for him. He was watching the war with keen unbiased eyes. Paul put to the King the urgent need for medical work in his country. He told him that they were ready to build a hospital in Hasa and treat people from there. Ibn Saud was interested but only said, **"I shall send for you again when I want you"**.

Back in Bahrain the work continued to grow. The mission had a girls' school and an orphanage that had been started through unwanted babies being left at the women's hospital instead of being smothered or drowned.

Evangelistic work continued. Paul and Gerrit van Peursem made weekly visits to villages where healing and teaching were inseparable. Every Sunday the chapel was filled with those who came to hear God's Word.

As the war progressed food and medicine were both in short supply and prices soared. The Mission Board in New York tried to send supplies on army ships. In one case Paul had to go to Iran to collect them as they had been sent to the mission hospital in Tehran by mistake. For years Paul had been trying to perfect a hernia operation that would prevent recurrences. He had learned to reinforce human tissue with ox fascia. This operation had been used successfully in hundreds of cases that came to him every year in Bahrain.

In the spring of 1944 Paul urged Anna to return to the USA to see the children as they had not seen them for 3½ years. The 3 boys were in naval training. It was possible for civilians to travel on convoy ships when there was room. So in June Anna flew to Cairo and as she waited for a passage she heard the news of D-Day.

In the USA Anna was able to see all the children except Paul Jr. who had already been sent to the Pacific. She did meet his wife and son – their first grandchild. Anna returned to Bahrain in November sailing by Portuguese ship to Lisbon and then on by plane directly to Bahrain.

With the end of the war peace brought material benefits back to Bahrain. Oil companies began to bring ex-patriate personnel. Many of the hospital workers were tempted away by the higher wages at oil company hospitals. Paul's hope that some of the hospital boys would turn to Christ was sadly not realised. He meditated on the parable of the leaven and wondered if that was the way that God's Kingdom would come in Arabia.



American Mission Hospital Bahrain

When the partition of Palestine was announced on the radio, there was a big reaction in Bahrain. People felt the establishment of a Jewish state was an invasion against the great religious brotherhood to which they all belonged.

By the summer of 1948 Paul was beginning to think about retirement. He believed it was time to hand over responsibility to a younger man. Although the church had emerged in two small congregations in Bahrain, the great hope of extending the work into central Arabia remained unfulfilled. He was disappointed but not discouraged. He believed God's plan would triumph at some point. To him there were no defeats – no hopeless situations.

The cheapest way to travel back to the USA was now by air. It was hard for Paul to fly over Bahrain leaving the island that had been his home and his world for so long. After a year of deputation, Paul joined the staff of Berea College in Kentucky. He thoroughly enjoyed three years of work and fellowship there. It was brought to an end by an urgent request from the mission for him to return to Bahrain for two years. Dr Gerald Nykerk had tuberculosis and had to return home. This new opportunity to return to Arabia was an undiluted pleasure for Paul. On his way back he spent a night in Basra very close to the place where he had lived with his bachelor colleagues on his arrival in Arabia so long ago.

As ever, Paul was determined medical work should be a tool for evangelism. He took every opportunity to preach and teach. He was delighted to receive an invitation to spend a week with the church in Muscat. In his second year back in Bahrain Ibn Saud died. According to his wish Saud was to be his successor. He was declared the new King of Saudi Arabia.

Paul learned that in government schools one of the required reading books was a short but very sympathetic life of Jesus. He said, **"Christ has stood at the door of Arabia a long time. Now they have accepted His life and teachings. In time they will understand why He had to die and rise again."**

Back in the USA Paul accepted a request to be the doctor at the Memorial Home Community at Penney Fields, Florida. He told the mission he would still be free to speak at mission gatherings in the summer.

First he had to take the Florida State Board exams. After three weeks of intense study he took them and passed. For the rest of his life Paul was committed to on-going learning in the medical field. He never thought of himself as elderly. He always counted himself a member of the Arabian Mission and prayed daily for the work in Arabia. Letters from colleagues on the Field were a constant source of joy to him.

None of the changes in the Middle East disturbed his confidence in the triumph of God's purposes in those lands. He believed fervently that Christ would be known and accepted as the One through whom God has reconciled the world to Himself. He died at Penney Fields in the autumn of 1962 after a short illness. He was 79 years old. Anna married Paul Johnson a great friend of Paul's. He died in 1975 and Anna continued at Penney Fields until her death in 1987.