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My Adventist Family History: Myths, Oral History and the Archives

Family history is challenging for the professional historian. Few practicing historians write about researching their own families, and there can be a sense that such investigations are the arena of the history “buff” or genealogist. I am writing Lily and Orley Ford’s articles for the *ESDA*. Lillian and Orley were missionaries to South America in the first part of the 20th century and Lily was my father’s great-aunt. She was Sam Shafer’s sister, and Sam and Susie had 11 children, one of whom was my grandmother, Evelyn Clark, and many of whom were active in the Adventist church. Over the decades, at family reunions he and his cousins and my grandmother passed along to me the legends they had heard about Orley and Lily when they were growing up, and the memories they had of the few times they met them. Their model of ministry and service became one of the major forces in developing the Shafer family’s self-image and identity.

My family are all very excited about this. But I know that sometimes the stories we learn through legend and lore can end up being un-verifiable and so may not make it into the official history. Perhaps the most important element of these family heroes won’t end up being what historians consider to be their significance, or perhaps the mitigating factors in their life look like criticisms. I have begun this work with some trepidation, for many

reasons—all of which have to do with “situating” the history of Lily and Orley Ford. Historians are interested in context, significance (“so what?”), and connections between the particular and the general. So as I tell this story, I am stretched by trying to situate the Ford’s story, especially Lily’s story (and it is her that this paper is primarily dealing with), within historiographical and methodological streams that I know very little about. I have reworked this paper to situate it within the context of the scholarship I’ve heard in the last five days as well as more traditional paradigms. So this paper is an attempt to get at how I am trying to situate Lily Ford’s story in a)methodological context, b)missionary history, c)women’s history, d)Latin American history, and e)in my own personal familial context. None of these streams or paradigms within which to assess/analyze their history are comfortable or familiar for me. So I hope I will hear from some of you with more training in these fields to help me find ways to articulate a useful “so what” in these arenas.

Let me tell you the brief overview of the history of Lillian and Orley Ford. Both born in the 1890s, Orley the son and grandson of pioneers to Walla Walla who had been friends with Marcus Whitman, Lily, the child of Midwestern farmers with a father who never became an Adventist and a mother who struggled to strengthen her children’s faith. They met at Walla Walla, both were interested in missions to South America, most likely from

the stories of the Stahls. They married in 1917, went for training at Loma Linda for two months, and then went to Peru for 3 years and to Ecuador for 9 years, with two furloughs within that. They were then transferred to Central America, living in Guatemala for 5 years and finishing their lives and service out in Costa Rica during the last 3 and 4 decades of their lives. They birthed 5 children, buried 3 of them, and adopted another. Their work consisted mostly of medical work in Peru and Ecuador, but as they moved to Central America they became more involved in administration: Orley as conference president and evangelist and Lily as Missionary Volunteer Secretary, although Orley appears to never have stopped pulling teeth while on his evangelistic efforts, even after he had retired in the 1960s. In fact, they retired at 65 and then continued to work almost full time till Orley died (apparently of cancer) in the early 1970s. Lily lived and continued to work in the center of San Salvador across the street from the conference headquarters until she had to move in with her son at the age of 92 in 1986.

Such are the facts as I've ascertained them so far. But to situate them requires some steps where I fear to tread, but which "micro histories" allow us to do (David on a panel where this was discussed). For instance:

A. Methodological Context –

I'm a historian of the early modern Atlantic and Mediterranean Worlds. I have primarily been thrilled with the access to typed primary sources as well as people who have known the people I am studying. I'm not used to this immediacy and finite organization. Secondary Sources: Like all historians, when I was volunteered for this assignment, I went right away for the secondary sources—what has been written on the Fords? All my relatives pointed to *These Fords Still Run* by Barbara Westphal and published by Pacific Press in 1962 and based on oral histories and personal relationships with the Fords. I checked out our library and found that book and another one for young adult audiences called *Mission in the Clouds* published in the 1980s by Eileen Lantry while Lily was still alive and mostly adapted from the Westphal book. I looked up Floyd Greenleaf's masterful history of the Adventist work in South America and there were many segments that included the Fords. His was the only academic work, however, and in no way constituted a biography. [The old encyclopedia article....](#)

Primary Sources: I have not exhausted all the letters in the GC archives, but there were many more than I thought there would be, most of them from the early period in the Ford's service in the Andes. I have not been able to track down Lily's personal letters, but I was able to find a book on their first 13 years of service that she wrote in 1931 under the name "Mrs Orley Ford" which

apparently none of my family knew existed and which is much more personal in some ways, but seems clearly intended as a promotional piece and thus has tantalizing gaps that a biographer (or for that—any engaged modern reader) would want to know about Lily's personal life outside the mission.

Oral History/family history: I'm doing a little bit of oral history here—calling up elderly relatives and asking about their memories as well as tracking down other people. But I have no real training in oral history or theory so am trying not to make too many egregious mistakes. More interestingly and potentially troubling is how much I find myself already influenced by the oral histories I've heard and the complexities of family relationships with their many layers of (mis)understanding. For instance, some of the family met the youngest, adopted son, of Lily Ford, and I heard disparaging remarks made about him along with the notion that since he was adopted, he might not be a legitimate source of information or a good representative of the Ford legacy. Having rich resources or strong engagement with the subject complicates research in so many ways. These issues and my own emotional connection and inspiration to study this woman underlay my professional commitment to being honest about the evidence and telling the whole truth. For the first time in my professional life, I'm having to think about the

disadvantage of having personal affection (even at a distance) for the subject of your research.

The lessons here are useful not just for families, but for any history that involves our identity and a close community. Being a public historian can involve treading on popular values and views; but equally, applying a professional perspective to a family or church's stories can add richness and depth, given a bit of gentle understanding and affection. The entire project of the ESDA involves these delicacies and requires me to ask the basic historical questions about what sources I'm listening to and whether one can ever be "balanced and objective" in crafting narrative about the past. Writing the biography of Lillian and Orley Ford has allowed me to hone some of those competencies.

B. Latin American History—

I do know something about Latin American history by virtue of being a teacher of the early modern Atlantic world and having read my way to some understanding about modern Latin America as well. And I find myself reflexively situating Lily's writing and biography within what I know of the context of broader Latin American politics, art and history. And this is different than it would be for most of my family if they were doing the reading

for inspirational or family history. For instance, Lily's book consistently refers to the political and cultural groups in Peru and Ecuador using the terms "liberal" and "conservative," with great preference for the former. My mother read her book over the holiday and said, "Don't you think it is interesting that she saw liberal as a positive thing, whereas today many traditional US Adventists might see it as a negative thing?" I found myself trying to explain Latin American politics, where Progressive/Liberal were associated with Protestants, modernity, the US, capitalism vs. Conservative/Religious, which saw the Catholic church and old landowners wanting to promote traditional economics and paternalism. Virtually all Americans would have found the Liberal party to be the one that they identified with, as those were the people recruiting or allowing Protestant missionaries and merchants.

However, Lily was more nuanced in her understanding of Latin American politics and the context. She and Orley and the Adventist missionaries in general, saw themselves as allies of the Indians, and this not only set them against the Conservative party, but against the racism and control of the Progressives as well. Lily in many ways embodied the apolitical orientation that Alec Ryrie discussed yesterday, even though as a modern and "civilized" North American, she could not escape her commitment to modernization. But her book lays out the ways she and

Orley helped the Indians with their collective land ownership, rather than relying on private property the way more liberals would have wanted.

The role of race in political orientation is one that Lily does not explicitly lay out, but has several hints towards. In one tragic case, the local Indians revolted against the state, identifying all white people as their enemy and attacking and killing many of them. Lily's description of that harrowing time shows the difficulty she found in negotiating her loyalties. Her own personal danger meant that she very much allied with the "white people." The Indians were out for white blood, she wrote, and the missionaries came very close to being attacked many times, with the governor sending soldiers out to protect them or sending them cables saying they needed to leave because of uprisings. She wrote that Indians were "on the warpath and were like wild dogs thirsting for blood" (p. 184). Even though she sympathized with the Indians as being exploited and usually being submissive, her own personal danger in this situation made it hard for her to try to understand or sympathize with their predicament.

Other elements from Latin American history that Lily's story is situated in and help make meaning of her context (and which her writing could help us understand) are: the role of the Catholic church in Indian life, economic

development and exploitation as well as infrastructure expansion, state formation, racial identity, the connection between the extraction economy and international relations. With respect to the identity and place of indigenous people in the society, Lily and Orley's writing and history demonstrates a tantalizing connection between how Americans at the turn of the last century viewed the "Indians" they were familiar with in North America compared to the local people they met and served, whether as missionaries or in other capacities. Orley's family connection with the Nez Perce in Walla Walla, the specific language that Lily uses, and the role of non-indigenous people in mediating between Indians and the state—these are all situated within the larger context of how nationalism and capitalism were impacting Indian communities throughout the Americas.

C. Missionary History—

I've had the privilege at this conference, and more recently at the ASCH to hear papers that discuss the context of missionary history. This is a growing field, both within and without the Christian history scholarship. Lily's story most obviously must be situated within her participation in the heyday of American missions. Lily describes her participation in the SVM movement that Edward Allen talked about yesterday. In fact, she

specifically outlines the different bands associated with parts of the world that the SVM used. She and Orley met because they were part of the South American band. Within the Adventist South and Central American missionary context, the Fords were direct inheritors of the Fernando and Ana Stahl, legendary advocates and effective evangelists who identified so closely with the Indians.

Other themes that show up in the Lily Ford story and need contextualizing within missionary historiography are:

1. the impact of missions on literacy vs. healthcare (Christie Chui-Shan Chow and Michael Campbell have researched the ways Adventist emphasis on literacy was variously effective depending on context in Asia and I see some of those same issues rising up here)
2. The challenge as Ruth Crocombe has recently articulated it of whether or not and to what extent to ally with political and cultural elites. As Ruth has shown in the China context, Lily Ford's promotional materials highlight their close relationship with the elites as a celebration point, but Lily is much more cautious and ambivalent about the impact of those elites on the Indians, who she very much prioritizes in her evangelism efforts.

3. The use of local workers and the relative value put on them. Lily consistently discussed the local workers in her writing, and their need for them, and while most of the time she didn't name them, in many cases she did.
4. Lily's story could also be talked about with respect to women's involvement in missions. I need to find out whether or not she was paid, but she was certainly running the schools, serving as a midwife and widely considered to be valued by the team—in fact, in a petition by the Indians to the government asking that the Fords be allowed to stay in Ecuador, Lily's work is mentioned at two different points, but Orley only once. However, it is clear that Orley is given precedence in the missionary literature—it is his name, not Lily's that Ed mentioned in citing who had been part of these missionary bands.
5. Promotional material—Lily wrote many of the stories and material that was needed to raise money and support for their work. The book published by Southern Pub is fascinating in that it never alludes specifically to Adventists or any Adventist distinctives such as Sabbath keeping, diet or alcohol—nor even the name Adventist. Was it intended to be sold to other Christians to raise money? It didn't seem to be for an Adventist audience. It is also potentially part of the genre of missionary story, which is how many Americans got

their information about the world, and Lily took great pains to give cultural, political, historical and geographical descriptions for her readers. She clearly saw this as an educational as well as inspirational book.

D. Women's History

I've been inspired by a recent panel sponsored by the CFH, including David Holland, to think about the ways this work is situated within Women's History, an area about which I know very little. But based on some of the ideas from that panel and from my reading of approaches to women's history, here are some ways Lily's life and work can illuminate our general understanding of how women have made their way in the world and themes from that field that help us understand Lily herself better.

1. Finding resources—her letters less saved?, She wasn't seen as the official missionary and so the GC has less on her
2. Self-presentation—David has looked at autobiography and the way gender played a role. Certainly Lily wasn't trying to assert herself in a feminist mode (Mrs. Orley Ford?!) and she includes very little about her personal life and her motherhood or the domestic side of thing, which

Holland has characterized as perhaps an attempt to see her story as a “universal” story. However, she did highlight the work, role and significance of women in her writing—a whole chapter on “Mrs Inca” and personifies the children and domestic work imaginatively in her book.

3. Agency and the role of personality in promoting some women more than others. Lily seems to have benefitted from the joint stories—perhaps because she wrote a book and lived longer than her husband, was extraverted and generated many of the oral histories the Westphal relied on, as well as doing much of the writing of the promotional materials in Central America. What’s fascinating is what later writers do to and about her. Westphal’s romanticization of the work has no place in Lily’s early writing (though the oral history Westphal uses may reflect Lily’s age and memory). The Lantry work is almost unforgiveable in its portrayal of Lily as a reluctant maternal figure, reliant on Orly, fearful and shrieking, who only did mission work because her own children had died. The evolution of Lily through the books published in the 20th century on them would contribute the cultural shifts in how women were written about in both Christian and secular contexts, as well as helping me understand why and how this happened to Lily

E. Situating my family in Adventist history:

As with Bill Knott and others here, I am situating this history and using it to make meaning of my own life and my family's values. The role of education, missions (my parents' experience in Peru), healthy activity, adoption are all themes that show up in my own family's sense of itself. The Fords are often cited as promoters and progenitors of these values. I can see that this isn't exactly straightforward, with my historian's eyes, and their history complicates what is often seen as a direct lineage of these values and reasons for my family's prioritization of them.

And I have to say that placing my subject in these contexts enriches my understanding of them. It is more interesting to think about the stories this way and placing people I've studied in the context of missions, women's history and Latin American history makes me appreciate other studies in those topics more because I have ties for them. Making connections, studying context, assessing complexity, pointing out contingency and analyzing change over time—that's what we historians do. In the end, of course, The Fords are no less inspiring for having their work and lives situated in context and subjected to analysis. My family can enjoy and be inspired their

history even if they are unable to confirm some of their favorite legends.