

MISS CHAMBERS - THE BELOVED MISSIONARY IN KESSAB

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By Vahe H. Apelian PhD, Columbus OH, USA, 4 November 2009

✘ I first heard Miss Chambers' name in my early teens. It may have been from my maternal grandmother or someone else of her generation in our extended family. My recollection puts me in company of family and friends in Keurkune seated cross-legged on the floor under the dim light of the kerosene lantern chatting of the bygones. Other than the endearing memories she had left behind, nothing else seems to have been known about her, not even her first name. She was simply the beloved Miss Chambers of the Kessabtsis who uttered her name in one breath and in local accent making Miss part of her name but not the title.

My curiosity of her rekindled recently upon reading Haigaz Terterian's article about the founding of the Kessab Educational Association in 1910. Haigaz, quoting Dr. Albert Apelian, makes reference to Miss Chambers' positive influence in fostering education and learning in Kessab at the turn of the 20th century. Coupling her name with Kessab I embarked on a search trusting that the powerful Internet search engines Google and Bing will shed some light about her. Not only I found more than I was expecting, but I also serendipitously came across her grand niece's email, a lady by the name of Danette Hein-Snider who has been doing research on her grand aunt's life and has managed to gather quite a bit of material in way of photos, reports written from the field, newspaper articles, and personal letters.

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Mrs. Danette writes "She (Effie Chambers) first planned to enter the missionary field with her soon to

be husband. But unfortunately he did not pass the physical, and so she had to make a choice to stay home and marry or go to the missionary field. She chose the missions and left her fiancé' and never married. Her home was burned at least twice and her friends insisted that she come home, but she told them God sent her to the Armenians and He would tell her when she was supposed to leave, and until then she would live with them and care for them to the best of her ability."

Her obituary states that "Miss Effie Chambers, fourth child of Mary and Harlow Chambers, was born 3 October 1863, at the family home north of Anderson (Iowa). She was one of eleven children, six daughters and five sons, seven preceding her in death. Her education was begun in a rural school close to this home and then moved to Sidney to enter the public school, where she prepared herself for teaching. At this time she united with the Presbyterian Church in Sidney under the pastorate of Rev. H. B. Dye. She taught in the Fremont County Schools, and then entered Iowa State Teachers College at Cedar Falls. Then she was given an appointment as teacher in the Creek Indian School in the Indian Territory, where she decided on Foreign Missions as her life's work. To prepare herself for this work she entered Tabor College, receiving her diploma in June 1893, and was accepted by the Congregational Board of Foreign Missions, and in the fall of 1893 sailed for Turkey, in Asia. There she remained 19 years in the service of Christ."

Miss Chambers did not go to Kessab when she first moved to Turkey. A report by the Woman's Board of Missions in 1898 places Miss Effie Chambers in Ourfa. Ephraim K. Jernazian in his book Judgment Unto Truth: Witnessing the Armenian Genocide translated into English by Alice Haig, places Miss Effie Chambers in Urfa in 1896. The 1905 Mission Studies: Woman's Work in Foreign Lands, Volumes 23-24 report that Miss Chambers has gone to teach in the Aintab Seminary. Both Urfa (Ourfa) and Aintab, depopulated of their Armenian inhabitants now, had sizable Armenian populations then.

The 1904 Annual Report of the American Commissioners of Foreign Mission, to the credit of the Kessabtsis reported the following: "Miss Chambers' first year in Kessab has been a good one in spite of many trying circumstances. The people welcomed her coming with cordiality and have aided her in many ways. The people here are not close-bound by customs and are ready to learn and put into practice new things. The Sunday school has about a thousand pupils. Miss Chambers makes earnest request for another lady to join her in this promising work at Kessab". It is not known if another lady joined Miss Chamber. She stood alone in the memories of her contemporaries in Kessab. Her grandniece, Mrs. Danette reports that she found these verses in her writings: "Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ". Galatians 6:2 "The harvest truly is plenteous, but the laborers are few." Matthew 9:37



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Thus we can safely conclude that Miss Effie Chambers arrived to Kessab in 1904 and remained there until her return to the United States in 1912 and thus endured the atrocities along with the rest of the

Kessabtsis during the 1909 massacres.

The New York Times on Monday April 26, 1909 reported the following: "Constantinople, April 25 - Dispatches reaching here from points in Asiatic Turkey bring tidings of Armenian and Turkish conflicts all over the country. Dr. JM Balph, who is in charge of the missions at Latakia, Syria, telegraphs that the refugees are arriving there from outlying parts of the district who report massacres and the burning of towns. He also reports that there are the gravest apprehensions concerning the conditions at Kessab where Miss Chambers is one of the missionaries". Edward Latimer Beach in his autobiography titled From Annapolis to Scapa Flow states that Miss Chamber's presence in Kessab became a justifiable cause for foreign powers to interfere in Kessab and prevent further atrocities in protecting an American citizen. Dr. Albert Apelian in his book in Armenian entitled Kessab and its Villages states that 152 persons, mostly old and young were killed during the pogroms, 516 houses, 62 businesses and 4 churches were destroyed causing widespread despair.

After the atrocities Miss Chambers stayed with the Kessabtsis and worked to ameliorate their situation. The June 1911 Missionary Herald reports the following: " With us in America the memory of the Armenian massacres of 1909 in the region of Adana may be becoming dim; on the ground the misery they entailed is very real and present. At Kessab they have yet no church building to replace the one that was destroyed, and Miss Effie Chambers is almost heart broken at finding no place where can be gathered the remnant of the church, further discouraged and burdened by the sufferings of a terrific winter. What is most needed is uplift of spiritual life, and this is hard to promote with no meeting place for worship and fellowship. If the money could be found for rebuilding, it would not only provide a sanctuary, but as well timely work for the people, to help them get their bread. Though the missionary herself with the rest is in need of clothes and a comfortable bed, the cry is not for these things, but for help that will prevent the passing of another winter without the blessing of a church home. It seems to this lone woman, tugging at her task, as though help for her distressed flock must come from those who are more abundantly provided with the aids and comforts of religion."

The dire circumstances took a toll on Miss Chamber's health as well. Her obituary states that her health was so affected that she returned to the United States in the spring of 1912, where she spent several years lecturing for the cause of Foreign Missions. On Wednesday May 8, 1912 College Eye, a publication by the students of Iowa State Teachers College, reported that "Miss Effie Chambers who graduated from the Teachers College some thirty years ago is spending a few days in the city. Miss Chambers has been engaged in missionary work in Armenia for several years. It will be remembered that she is responsible for sending Bedros Apelian to the college to complete his education. Miss Chambers addressed the students on her work in Armenia at the regular prayer meeting hour last Sunday night". After Iowa Rev Bedros Apelian continued his education at the Columbia University and served his calling on the east coast and among others officiated the wedding of Henry and Virginia Apelian on April 4, 1959. Miss Effie Chambers spent the remaining years of her life with her brother Will in the old family home where she died on October 3, 1947 at the age of 84 and was

buried in Chambers cemetery, which was given to the community by her grandfather, Ezekiel Chambers, in the year 1857.

Thus ended the life of Miss Effie Chambers, who left an indelible and enduring impression on her contemporaries in Kessab some of whom as pupils in her Sunday school or as young men and women carried her memory into their old age and passed it to the next generation. The legacy of her contribution to the Kessabtsis endured, however much like other unwritten stories, over time she faded into oblivion to have rightful place in the memories of the younger generations of Kessabtsis.

An interactive map of Kessab:

