

**THE JOURNEY OF DR. JOHN A. SNELL:  
A REFLECTION OF THE CHINESE MISSIONS IN TRANSITION**

**DALE DAILEY**

The history of Methodist missions, both domestic and foreign, is an aggregate of the stories of individuals—men and women—who have sought to live out their Christian vocation under the mandate of the Great Commission: to go into the whole world, making disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19). With specific reference to China, by the early years of the twentieth century, the Methodist missionary movement was well established, drawing on an inspired wave of young missionaries who believed that they could save the whole world for Christ within their generation. The story of the life of Dr. John A. Snell provides an opportunity to observe the Methodist missionary movement in China during the first third of the twentieth century, a period many consider its most productive. Paradoxically, his years of service also coincided with a period when more and more Christians were questioning the role of foreign missions: Had the missions already served their purpose? Should Westerners even be attempting to supplant local cultures and religions?<sup>1</sup> The answers to these and related questions would soon lead to fundamental changes in Methodist missions.

Snell had only recently graduated from medical school when he arrived in China in 1909. He quickly proved himself to be an unusually gifted surgeon who achieved an almost mythic stature. His siblings would proudly describe themselves as the brothers or sisters of Dr. John Snell, “the famous missionary doctor.”<sup>2</sup> Among his medical colleagues, he was considered to be “one of the most progressive and capable surgeons of modern times.”<sup>3</sup> Vanderbilt University honored him as “one of its illustrious alumni.”<sup>4</sup> Many of his Chinese patients considered him to be nothing less than a miracle worker.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> William Ernest Hocking, *Re-Thinking Missions: A Laymen's Inquiry after One Hundred Years* (New York and London: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1932), 4-6.

<sup>2</sup> Maud Elnora Snell Chandler, oldest sister of John A. Snell, from her biography prepared by her daughters, Grace Warden and Flora Caldwell, *Maud Elnora Snell Chandler, Born November 27, 1871, Duluth, Minn.* (Self-published about 1952, in possession of the author), 1. This biography was prepared by her daughters while Maud was still alive. Maud remained close to her brother throughout his life and spent nearly three years with him in China.

<sup>3</sup> Dr. W. G. Gram, “Church Mourns Death of Mission Worker.” (Nashville, TN: Unattributed obituary of Dr. John A. Snell, 1936).

<sup>4</sup> “John A. Snell: 1880-1936,” *The Vanderbilt Alumnus* 21.6 (April, 1936), 4.

<sup>5</sup> At the time, the Chinese had no equivalent to Western surgery. As a result, relatively routine procedures such as appendectomies were viewed as miraculous.

During his years in China, Snell began to ask the same perplexing questions that others were asking. His search for answers led him to return to one of the most fundamental of Christ's teachings: "Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another" (John 13:34). Snell had only recently come to a deeper understanding of these words; he was in the prime of life and seemed indomitable when fate intervened. He was struck down by pneumonia on March 2, 1936, at the age of 55.

The life of Dr. John A. Snell can serve as an exemplum for hundreds of missionaries who joined the Protestant effort to save the peoples of the world for Christ. His story provides an opportunity to observe how the missions expanded in both their services and in their acceptance by the Chinese during his tenure. It also reflects how the shifting, more liberal attitudes of the 1930s would eventually alter the course of foreign missions and profoundly change one man.

### The China Missions

During his years in China, Snell was following in the footsteps of hundreds who had served before him. Missions had been established in China and elsewhere with the belief that non-believers would be won over to Christ if they experienced Western thought through Christian ministry, education, and medicine. Many historians have seen the Protestant missionary movement that began in the mid-nineteenth century as an extension of the belief that America had been especially blessed by God and now had a responsibility to share Christ's words with those in countries who had never heard them. At its heart, the missionary movement reflected a deeply-felt—and, in retrospect, blatantly culturally chauvinistic—desire to save the "heathens" from damnation. Hudson Taylor, founder of the China Inland Mission, urged those attending the 1894 convention of the Student Volunteer Movement into action: "Every day, every week, every month they are passing away. A million a month in China, they are dying without God."<sup>6</sup>

The first Methodist missionaries to China, Rev. Judson Dwight Collins and Moses C. White stepped ashore near Foochow (Fuzhou) on September 30, 1847. During their brief time in China, they encountered many obstacles, the greatest being local diseases and the determined efforts of Chinese rulers to block everything foreign. Both men fell ill with typhoid fever and by 1852 were forced to leave China, but reinforcements had already arrived who would carry on.<sup>7</sup> Methodist missions grew slowly, but steadily and by

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<sup>6</sup> Hudson Taylor, *The Student Missionary Enterprise: Addresses and Discussions of the Second International Convention of the Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions*, Max Wood Moorhead, ed. (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1994), 48.

<sup>7</sup> Wade Crawford Barclay, *History of Methodist Missions, Part 2, The Methodist Episcopal Church, 1845-1939, Volume Three, Widening Horizons* (New York: The Board of Missions of the Methodist Church, 1957), 369-375. The initial mission in Foochow was sponsored by the Methodist Episcopal Church, North. In 1848, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South established a mission in Nanking led by Revs. Charles Taylor and B. Jenkins.

1891, there were 100 missionaries with over 4,000 active communicants.<sup>8</sup>

The next twenty years saw a rapid expansion of Protestant missions. The charge was led by the Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions which included young people from most of the major Protestant denominations. The movement, an outgrowth of the YMCA, challenged college and university students to become missionaries. Their meetings and conferences were inspirational events religious fervor and jubilation reigned at the prospect of saving millions of non-Christians. By 1892, the organization had enlisted over 7,500 volunteers and 510 were already serving abroad in several countries.<sup>9</sup>

Along with a steady flow of recruits, several other factors contributed to the rapid growth of Protestant missions. In the early twentieth century, the world was largely free of wars, and improved transportation made travel easier. Men's and women's missionary societies sprang up in hundreds of churches to support foreign missions. American business executives contributed generously through organizations such as the Laymen's Missionary Movement or through their own foundations.<sup>10</sup> In China, the treaty that ended the Boxer Rebellion in September of 1901 gave foreigners almost unlimited access to the whole country.<sup>11</sup>

### Dr. Snell's Early Years

In 1909, the typical medical missionary departing for China was a young male, well educated, theologically conservative, and recently married. Snell exemplified all of these qualities and also brought his own unique history, personality, and motives to China. To understand him better, it is useful to explore his immediate ancestors.

John Abner Snell was likely named for his two grandfathers, Johann (John) Schnell and Abner Jarrett, and represented a unique amalgamation of two very different families. His paternal grandfather, Johann Schnell, emigrated from Germany around 1836 as a young man. During his exceptionally long life, he relocated across the young nation, from New York, to Pennsylvania, to Wisconsin and finally to central Minnesota.<sup>12</sup> Brief accounts of his life indicate he was a proud, independent man who would rather die

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<sup>8</sup> Eugene R. Smith, ed., *Gospel in All Lands* (New York: Eugene R. Smith, January, 1891), 479. The total Methodist missionaries included 41 missionaries, 36 wives, and 23 single ladies. At the time, approximately one in eight American Protestant missionaries in China were Methodists.

<sup>9</sup> Wade Crawford Barclay, *History of Methodist Missions in Six Volumes, The Methodist Episcopal Church 1845-1939, Volume Three: Widening Horizons, 1845-1895* (New York: The Board of Missions of the Methodist Church, 1957), 90-92.

<sup>10</sup> Paul A. Varg, "Motives in Protestant Missions, 1890-1917," *Modern American Protestantism And Its World, Vol. 13, Missions and Ecumenical Expressions*, Martin E. Marty, ed. (New York: K. G. Saur, 1993), 5-9.

<sup>11</sup> The Boxer Protocol ending the war was one of a sequence of unequal treaties that the Chinese were forced to sign with Western powers.

<sup>12</sup> Dale J. Dailey, *Dailey-Snell Family Story* (Fort Wayne, IN: Allen County Public Library special edition, 2005), 73-74.

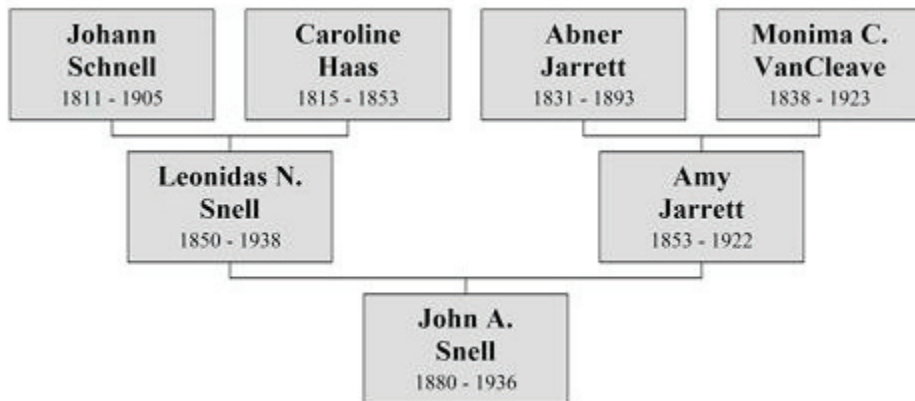


Figure 1. Parents and Grandparents of John A. Snell

than ask for help.<sup>13</sup> Little is known of Carolyn Haas except that she was also born in Germany and died in Wisconsin while still fairly young.

Johann and Caroline's youngest son, Leonidas N. Snell, was the father of John Abner Snell. Throughout his life, Leonidas displayed a foot-loose independence similar to his father, routinely pulling up stakes and moving his family, usually prompted by some get-rich scheme. Charitably, he can be viewed as a visionary frontiersman. More realistically, he was an impetuous risk-taker and poor money manager. As he grew older, he became increasingly more distrustful and disagreeable.<sup>14</sup>

The ancestors of John Snell's mother, Amy Jarrett, included early Dutch and English immigrants. Long before the American Revolution, Amy's maternal ancestors, the VanCleave family, settled in what is now New York City. Their descendants moved south to North Carolina and then accompanied Daniel Boone across the Appalachian Mountains into Kentucky. A generation later, their descendants moved on to west-central Indiana.<sup>15</sup> Less is known about Amy's father Abner Jarrett: he farmed and supplemented his income by raising and selling mules.<sup>16</sup>

Amy grew up near Crawfordsville, Indiana, a fledgling college town self-proclaimed as the "Athens of Indiana." Her family had strong fundamentalist religious leanings, and her uncle was a famous itinerant preacher. While a teenager, Amy's family moved from the relatively developed region near

<sup>13</sup> *History of Green County, Wisconsin* (Springfield, IL: Union Publishing Company, 1884), 658. One example of his independence: "John Snell, a German, . . . moved to the town of Sylvester where he and his family were found by C. Meinert in 1845 in poor circumstances. The whole family was sick in bed, the fire was out and the water in the teakettle was frozen. Martin Sutherland and Mr. Meinert removed the family to Mr. Sutherland's house for better treatment."

<sup>14</sup> Maud Snell Chandler, letter to her brother, February 6, 1935. All of the Maud Snell letters cited are in the possession of the author.

<sup>15</sup> Dailey, 84-85.

<sup>16</sup> *The Twelfth Annual Fair, McLeod County [Minnesota] Agricultural Society* (1884), 41.

Crawfordsville to McLeod County, Minnesota, then at the edge of the frontier.<sup>17</sup>

The families of Leonidas Snell and Amy Jarrett were neighbors in McLeod County. The young couple married September 2, 1870, and soon moved to a small settlement near Duluth, Minnesota. Leonidas was likely drawn north to the potential opportunities associated with the booming lumber trade and by new federal lands that were becoming available. John Abner Snell was born in Knife Falls, Minnesota, on October 28, 1880, the fifth of eight children. When he was around five, his family made the long trek from northern Minnesota to central Florida, then a swampy, insect-infested frontier. They settled in Kissimmee, Florida where John grew up and graduated from high school.<sup>18</sup>

At home, John received a solid Methodist education, receiving training both at home and at Sunday school. At eleven, he decided to “accept Jesus Christ as [his] personal savior and join the church.” He later wrote that at fourteen, there came into his “life a desire to devote myself to God’s service. It was what I considered a call.”<sup>19</sup>

It was John’s mother, Amy (Jarrett) Snell, who insisted her children obtain the best education possible. She felt so strongly about the importance a college education that she left her husband sometime around 1888 and took her sons to Nashville, Tennessee, where college was more readily available. To support her family, Amy grew vegetables and baked and then sold her goods at market. Amy remained in Nashville until around 1916 when her children had all completed their educations. Only then did she return to Leonidas in south Florida.<sup>20</sup>

Nineteen-year-old John Snell entered Emory College in 1899. He transferred to Peabody Normal College in Nashville after his first year and completed his undergraduate education on May 27, 1903.<sup>21</sup> It was during this period that his life intersected with the missionary movement. Snell had been active in the YMCA “holding various offices and teaching Bible and Missionary Study classes.”<sup>22</sup> Near the end of his undergraduate years, he joined the Student Volunteer Movement and probably attended the move-

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<sup>17</sup> Dailey, 86-87. The “Athens of Indiana” is a reference to Crawfordsville as the home of Wabash College. The college was founded in 1832 and was modeled after conservative liberal arts colleges of New England.

<sup>18</sup> Grace Warden and Flora Caldwell, *Maud Elnora Snell Chandler; Born November 27, 1871, Duluth, Minn.*, 2.

<sup>19</sup> John A. Snell, letter dated January 16, 1908, to W. R. Lambuth, applying for missionary work (The United Methodist Archives Center, Drew University, Madison, NJ).

<sup>20</sup> Grace Birkett Snell, *The Life of Grace Birkett Snell: An Autobiography* (Self published, 1965), 6. In her understated manner, Grace reported that Amy “was keeping house for her children who were in college and elementary school. There had been some slight misunderstanding between her and her husband, but the separation was not for long.” Actually, it was approximately 18 years.

<sup>21</sup> Peabody Normal School in Nashville became Peabody College and later, part of Vanderbilt University.

<sup>22</sup> John A. Snell, letter dated January 16, 1908, to W. R. Lambuth (The United Methodist Archives Center microfilm).

ment's 1906 national convention which was held in Nashville.

### Marriage and the Missions

During his junior year at Peabody, Snell met his future wife, Grace Evelyn Birkett, who was also a student. Grace later recalled her first impression of John, "a fine looking young man [with] handsome brown eyes and curly hair." The couple became engaged on Thanksgiving Day, 1902.<sup>23</sup> Soon after completing his undergraduate degree, Snell left for California for two years to teach school and earn money to help support his mother and younger brothers.<sup>24</sup> Snell returned to Nashville in 1905 and debated whether "he ought to be a minister or a doctor." His pragmatic decision was to become a doctor, "feeling there was a greater need for doctors and that his life would count for more." Snell entered Vanderbilt Medical College in 1905 and he and Grace were married on November 1, 1907, by Grace's brother-in-law, James Clarke.<sup>25</sup>

In 1908, with graduation approaching, Snell applied to the Methodist Episcopal Church South, to work in the foreign missions. In his application, he wrote that he believed that the missions would allow him to accomplish "the purpose I have come to believe God has for my life." He expressed his "intense desire to help the needy" by making the ultimate commitment: "I could not think of going into so great a work other than for life."<sup>26</sup> John received glowing recommendations from all those who knew him. One summarized several of his qualities:

I regard him to be thoroughly conscientious and honest in business, thoughtful of others, capable of making friends readily, easily adaptive to his surroundings, controlling his temper and tongue, and possessed with a sincere desire to serve God and benefit humanity in every way possible.<sup>27</sup>

Upon his graduation in May, 1908, the young doctor was accepted into missionary service. Following a brief internship, he and Grace sailed for Soochow, China, arriving in January, 1909, to begin their first and only mission assignment.

### A Hospital and a Mentor

Drs. Walter R. Lambuth and William Hector Park had established Soochow Hospital in 1883, and Dr. Park was still there when Dr. Snell ar-

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<sup>23</sup> Grace Birkett Snell, *The Life of Grace Birkett Snell*, 8.

<sup>24</sup> *The Peabody Alumni Directory* (1909), 273. The directory indicates that John served as principal at a school in Goleta, California during 1903-1904 school year and was at the Calistoga, California school for the 1904-1905 school year.

<sup>25</sup> Snell, *The Life of Grace Birkett Snell*, 10.

<sup>26</sup> John A. Snell, application for missionary work (The United Methodist Archives Center-microfilm).

<sup>27</sup> Z. S. Loftis, part of John Snell's application for the missions (The United Methodist Archives Center, microfilm).

rived in 1909.<sup>28</sup> Dr. Park was a larger-than-life man who continued to be the public face of the hospital to the local residents. Early in his assignment, he had earned the title of an “honorary Mandarin” for saving the life of a local official.<sup>29</sup> From its founding, the hospital had adopted three goals that were common among Methodist hospitals in China: to relieve suffering, to be ultimately self-sufficient, and to provide a model which the Chinese might imitate.<sup>30</sup>

The hospital was comprised of a series of free-standing buildings connected by enclosed walkways around a courtyard. Compared to traditional Western hospitals, it first appeared to be quite primitive. Grace Snell wrote that “the rooms were barely furnished, not even mattresses on the beds. The patients brought their own bedding and their own kin took care of them.”<sup>31</sup> The hospital design actually struck an effective balance between traditional Chinese practices and the latest concepts from the West.<sup>32</sup>

Soon after arriving in Soochow, Snell received his Chinese name, Soo E-sang. “Soo” is part of the name of his adopted city, Soo-chow, and means to revive or cheer up. He was still learning the basics of the Chinese language when Dr. Park left for a one year furlough. The young doctor now found himself in charge. He welcomed the challenge, although his letters home continued to ask for his family’s prayers.<sup>33</sup> When Dr. Park returned from furlough, the two doctors divided the hospital responsibilities. Dr. Park focused on general medicine and his “specials,” patients who could pay for their services. He also started a medical school to begin the process of training local doctors.<sup>34</sup> Snell assumed responsibility for surgery and hospital

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<sup>28</sup> Dr. Walter R. Lambuth had moved on to other assignments after founding the hospital in Soochow. In 1909, he was the General Secretary of the Board of Missions and had chaired the selection process for Dr. Snell. In the preface to *Medical Missions: The Twofold Task*, (New York: Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions, 1920), he described the work of the medical missionary: “His is no profession, it is a vocation.”

<sup>29</sup> “American Mandarin: Dr. William H. Park Honored for Saving Officer’s Life,” *New York Times* (June 24, 1894). Dr. Park was also a graduate of the Vanderbilt Medical School, class of 1880.

<sup>30</sup> R. S. Greene, “The Medical Work of Christian Missions in China,” an address presented April 19, 1917 (Rockefeller Archive Center, Sleepy Hollow, NY). As early as 1871, the Annual Meeting in Foochow of Methodists (both missionary and converts) voted unanimously to continue the goal of “Self-support” (see *Missions and Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Volume 1*, by John Morrison Reid). Self-support or self-sufficiency meant more than financial independence; it included a commitment to train locals to eventually assume complete responsibility for the operation of the missions.

<sup>31</sup> Grace Birkett Snell, *The Life of Grace Birkett Snell*, 20.

<sup>32</sup> Michelle Renshaw, *Accommodating the Chinese: The American Hospital in China, 1880-1920* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 52-55. Dr. Lambuth designed the hospital with an openness that facilitated the flow of fresh air throughout the facility. The idea of a hospital was quite revolutionary in China. Prior to the arrival of Protestant missionaries, the Chinese cared for their sick at home.

<sup>33</sup> John A. Snell, letter addressed to “Dear Everybody” (March 21, 1909). All of John A. Snell’s personal letters are in the possession of the author unless otherwise noted.

<sup>34</sup> *Golden Jubilee Commemoration Volume of the Fiftieth Anniversary: China Annual Conference, Methodist Episcopal Church, South* (Shanghai: Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1935), 64. The brief biography of Dr. Park related that training future native doctors was where he “found his greatest satisfaction.”

administration.<sup>35</sup>

In 1917, the two men began planning and fund-raising for a new, larger hospital. Snell “visited Japan and different places in China where new hospitals had been built and gathered new ideas” that could be incorporated into the design.<sup>36</sup> In 1919, a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation permitted construction to begin.<sup>37</sup> The three story hospital followed a more traditional Western design than the original. It incorporated the very latest medical technology and even had air conditioning in the operating room.

Dr. Park died in 1927 in Florida while on furlough, but at the request of the Chinese, his ashes were returned to his beloved Soochow for burial. Hundreds of Chinese attended his burial service, a testament to their appreciation for the medical services he had provided and the affection they felt for him. Snell wrote eloquently about the legacy of Park, of the lives he had saved, and of his love of the Chinese people. He likely included himself along with Dr. Park’s patients when he wrote, “Thanks to Dr. Park, my life was saved.”<sup>38</sup>

### **Dr. Snell: Surgeon, Administrator, and Researcher**

During his many years of service, Snell earned the respect and admiration of both his patients and colleagues. One colleague recalled a case that exemplified Snell’s medical skill, his compassion, and his perseverance:

A little girl about eleven years old was brought in with tuberculosis of the left hip with discharging sinus. She was an orphan . . . . No one came to visit her. Dr. Snell (who gets most of his thrills out of incurable cases) thought her curable and set to work to prove it. Throughout twenty months—609 hospital days—he labored to save her. He operated three times; he x-rayed her five times; he was so impressed with what a fine sport she was that he came to love her as though she were his own child. Imagine his great joy when he discharged her on December 31, 1930 as cured.<sup>39</sup>

Snell worked tirelessly as the chief surgeon, averaging two major operations per day.<sup>40</sup>

Throughout most of Snell’s years in Soochow, he also served as the chief hospital administrator, a task that could easily have been a full-time job. Fund raising, both for new facilities and to sustain hospital operations, was an unrelenting requirement. This effort became ever more urgent as the hos-

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<sup>35</sup> Dr. Snell officially became superintendent of the hospital in 1924, but had performed the functions before that date. He also taught surgery at Dr. Park’s medical school.

<sup>36</sup> Grace Birkett Snell, *The Life of Grace Birkett Snell*, 299.

<sup>37</sup> Application of Soochow Hospital to the Rockefeller Foundation from the China Medical Board dated October 16, 1919. The cornerstone was laid May 29, 1920, and the hospital was completed in 1921 (Rockefeller Archive Center).

<sup>38</sup> *Report of the Soochow Hospital for the Year 1927*, 3. The commemorative acknowledges the many lives that had been saved by Dr. Park’s medical skills and also underscores the lessons of love he taught through his personal example.

<sup>39</sup> “Report of the Park Memorial Charity Fund,” March 12, 1931 (in possession of the author).

<sup>40</sup> “Some Vanderbilt Men in China,” *Vanderbilt Alumnus Magazine* 6.4 (February, 1921), 108-109.



pital sought to increase its services at the same time missionary societies were reducing their support. After 1920, most funding for new facilities came from the Rockefeller Foundation.<sup>41</sup>

Staffing was also an ongoing challenge. The hospital became a victim of its own success—more and more Chinese were seeking treatment while at the same time, fewer and fewer American doctors and nurses were entering the mission field.<sup>42</sup> As a consequence, by the late 1920s, twenty-three of the twenty-five members of the professional staff of the hospital were native Chinese.<sup>43</sup> Most had been trained in western medicine in China, but their training often lacked the rigor and professionalism of medicine in America. Left solely in their own hands, western medicine often “degenerated into writing prescriptions and collecting money [with] very little diagnosis.”<sup>44</sup> Snell would never compromise his standards and mentored many interns and young doctors to become real professionals. One measure of his success was that beginning in 1926, Soochow Hospital met the standards of the American Board of Surgeons for a regular hospital, one of only four in China to do so.<sup>45</sup>

Finally, in addition to his surgical and administrative duties, Snell somehow conducted wide-ranging, rigorous scientific and public health investigations.<sup>46</sup> This work was consistent with the goal of the missions to find long-term remedies for the chronic diseases that plagued China. Among his many contributions, he assisted in discovering the snail which acts as the intermediate host of the oriental blood fluke, a debilitating and sometimes fatal disease.<sup>47</sup> He tested every patient entering the hospital for syphilis and compiled the first accurate information on the prevalence of the disease in China.<sup>48</sup>

### Dr. Snell and the Missionary Community

Snell was an enigma to many of his fellow missionaries. Despite his medical accomplishments, some of his associates questioned his motives and even wondered why he had become a missionary. One of his daughters-in-law, herself the daughter of a missionary, once commented, “I never

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<sup>41</sup> The archive of the Rockefeller Foundation includes numerous requests from Soochow Hospital for both facility and operational funding (Rockefeller Archive Center).

<sup>42</sup> Membership in the Student Volunteer Movement peaked in 1922 and declined thereafter for a number of reasons. The decline in foreign missions actually buoyed the eventual transition of the hospital to the Chinese.

<sup>43</sup> *Report of the Soochow Hospital for the Year 1929*, 1-2. The nationality of staff is based upon their surnames.

<sup>44</sup> Gee Gist, letter of October 18, 1930, to the Rockefeller Foundation (Rockefeller Archive Center).

<sup>45</sup> *Report of the Soochow Hospital for the Year 1926*, 2.

<sup>46</sup> Snell was the author of at least five medical articles that were published in various journals.

<sup>47</sup> Dr. Henry E. Meleny, *Tribute to John A. Snell*, 1936 (in possession of the author).

<sup>48</sup> Sidney David Gamble, *Peking: A Social Survey Conducted under the auspices of The Princeton University Center in China and The Peking Young Men's Christian Association* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1921), 259. Gamble cites the work of Dr. J. A. Snell of Soochow.

understood why Snell chose to work in the missions.<sup>49</sup> Most of the controversy surrounding Snell revolved around the businesses he developed and maintained outside of his missionary work. Missionaries were expected to turn any money earned in China “over to boards . . . to avoid even the appearance of self-seeking.”<sup>50</sup> Snell couldn’t quite accept this expectation.

Throughout his adult life, he was driven by twin goals: to provide the best medical care possible and to achieve a modest level of financial well-being for himself and his family. This financial need was certainly a reaction to the poverty and uncertainty he had experienced as a child. Early on, he decided to supplement his missionary income. He turned his hobby of collecting Chinese currency into a small business, buying and selling coins.<sup>51</sup> Around 1920, when construction of the new hospital was about to begin, he bought and refurbished a brick factory to produce high quality bricks for the new building. Later in 1933, he responded to a need for fresh milk by establishing the first dairy in the Soochow area. One tribute at the time of his death summarized the divergent positions regarding Snell’s convictions and his money making endeavors:

The outstanding characteristics of Dr. Snell [are] vigor, energy, persistence, and an entire indifference to any convention that might stand in the way of what he considered a right and worthy course of action.

One can still sense the ruffled feathers in the missionary community. The tribute continued:

[More than one] member of the mission has said to another member that it was difficult to square Snell’s brick factory and dairy with the mission rule against engaging in outside enterprises. The invariable reply, which invariably was granted, was that Snell did a full-sized man’s job as a missionary doctor, and that the time and strength he gave to these other enterprises were no more than others devoted to recreation.<sup>52</sup>

## Home and Family Life

John Snell always enjoyed the new and innovative, whether in the hospital or at home. In 1920, he oversaw the design and construction of a new home near the hospital. Architecturally, the house was a large, imposing structure reminiscent of Southern mansions. The home was furnished with local furniture supplemented by occasional shipments from Montgomery Ward stores in the States. Inside, the house featured electricity, central heat, running water, and the first flush toilet in the city.

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<sup>49</sup> Florence Moffett Snell, 2002 interview with the author.

<sup>50</sup> Arthur Judson Brown, *The Why and How of Foreign Missions: Churchman’s Edition* (New York: Young People’s Missionary Movement of the United States and Canada, 1911), 100.

<sup>51</sup> Dr. Fred P. Manget. The information cited is from a copy of a lengthy obituary intended for a “medical journal” Dr. Manget prepared for Dr. Snell and submitted to Grace Snell. It is not known if it was published. Manget was a close associate of John Snell at Soochow Hospital in 1921 and served in China as a medical missionary for many years. Snell named his youngest son, Fred Manget Snell.

<sup>52</sup> “Major Loss in Snell’s Death,” unattributed newspaper obituary for John A. Snell (in possession of the author).

Snell recognized that he short-changed his family.<sup>53</sup> Despite his busy schedule, he did stay connected to his children and was the dominant influence in shaping their lives. He encouraged his children to set high goals, to find their true calling, and to dedicate themselves to their work. In one example, he wrote to his oldest son, Raymond, “First and foremost be a man in whatever work you choose and you will accomplish much good in the world. The profession of manhood is never overcrowded.”<sup>54</sup>

Every seven years (1916, 1923, 1931), the family returned to the United States for furlough, supposedly a time for rest and relaxation. But furloughs for the Snell family were always a whirlwind of activity: short courses to upgrade Snell’s medical skills, visits to far-flung relatives, family adventures at national parks, and occasional money-making schemes. At the end of the 1931 furlough, he shared his love of the outdoors with his children—of adventure and risk-taking—by visiting several of the national parks in the west. Grace Snell later recalled a day of hiking at Yosemite National Park, “Oh!! The older children had a wonderful time with their Daddy. . . . Their Daddy gave them freedom for fun and expression.”<sup>55</sup>

The year 1932 proved to be a pivotal one for Snell. While on his recent furlough, he had particularly enjoyed his time with his children, many of whom would remain in the States to continue their educations. During his travels and in his reading, he been exposed to new, more humanistic concepts for what it meant to be a Christian. He had visited in Florida with his aging father, a man he recognized was becoming more bitter and recalcitrant. Upon his return to Soochow, he found his workload was greater than ever.<sup>56</sup> He would turn 52 during the year; possibly it was a time to reevaluate what lay ahead.

During this same period, the future of foreign missions was also being reevaluated. For a variety of reasons, outsiders had long criticized foreign missions, but now many liberal Protestants were expressing similar doubts about the validity of missions. Theologically, some were also promoting the tenets of a “social gospel,” that performing good works was more important

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<sup>53</sup> In a lengthy letter to his children written in 1933 while on a ship to Japan to buy cows for his dairy, Snell cautioned, “This is a much longer letter than I had intended to write and longer than I will write for a long time to come. For at home, I do not have the time to spare; there is always something waiting to be done.” During 1935, Snell wrote a letter to his children in the States almost every month. The letters were circulated among his children and many were saved by John Raymond Snell.

<sup>54</sup> John A. Snell, letter to John “Raymond” Snell (August 16, 1930).

<sup>55</sup> Grace Birkett Snell, *The Life of Grace Birkett Snell*, 37.

<sup>56</sup> One particularly troubling incident greeted Snell soon after he returned to Soochow. He learned that the hospital superintendent, Dr. K. H. Li, had misused his position and appropriated significant funds from the hospital while Snell was gone. Dr. Li was a native Chinese and his appointment was consistent with the long held goal of having the Chinese eventually assume responsibility for the operation of the hospital. Snell reported in a letter to the Missionary Board on September 15, 1932: “I had spent ten years trying to make Dr. Li into a strong professional man. Here the last year, he has simply gone batty for money. . . . The fact that Li has failed as a doctor in what I have been trying to make him has cut me deep” (microfilm, The United Methodist Archives Center).

than theology; that improving the lives of the downtrodden was of greater consequence than saving an individual soul. Two books often shaped these discussions.

The first of these books is *Re-Thinking Missions: A Laymen's Inquiry after One Hundred Years*.<sup>57</sup> The growth of foreign missions had not occurred without its detractors. In 1911, while Snell was still settling into missionary life, a handbook for American churchmen was published, explaining all aspects of the foreign missions. The book-length manual included a whole chapter devoted to "The Missionary Enterprise and Its Critics."<sup>58</sup> All the potential criticisms that could be expected were covered: question of priorities (still work to be done at home); motives (religious, economic, and political); and several variations on the theme of about "forcing an alien civilization on them." The criticisms and the book's responses were mostly framed within the context of questions non-believers were asking. By 1930, the same questions were still being asked, but now they were being asked by some within Protestantism. As a result of this intensified debate, a comprehensive review of missions was initiated by the Rockefeller Foundation, which had become the major financial benefactor of foreign missions.

Representatives from seven of the major Protestant denominations active in foreign missions directed the inquiry which was designed to provide an "objective appraisal" of the missions. The resulting report, *Re-Thinking Missions: A Laymen's Inquiry after One Hundred Years* was completed and published in 1932.<sup>59</sup> The study attempted to discern and enumerate the many changes that had occurred in the world during the century of missionary activity.<sup>60</sup> This study was unique, in that it included the voices of the "peoples of the Orient." Virtually all previous evaluations had been internal to the missionary societies themselves and were typically limited to inspiring anecdotes and a report of increasing numbers: missionaries, schools, hospitals, and communicants.

The inquiry recognized that its major conclusions might be controversial

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<sup>57</sup> William Ernest Hocking, *Re-Thinking Missions: A Laymen's Inquiry after One Hundred Years* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1932).

<sup>58</sup> Brown, 189-220.

<sup>59</sup> The denominations represented were: the Methodist Episcopal Church, the Northern Baptist Convention, the Reformed Church in America, the Congregational Church, the Episcopal Church in the United States of America, the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, and the United Presbyterian Church of North America. Each of the seven denominations provided five directors to oversee the inquiry. The actual inquiry was conducted by a distinguished group, many associated with prestigious colleges and universities.

<sup>60</sup> Hocking, 18-24. The authors outline three fundamental changes that had occurred since the beginning of American Protestant missions: *The altered theological outlook*—the move "from the negative to the affirmative side of its message; it is less a religion of fear and more a religion of beneficence; *the emergence of a world-culture*—increased knowledge of foreign cultures had led to a recognition that they were highly developed and actually shared many of the beliefs of the West; *the rise of nationalism in the East*—the nations of the East were now accepting new ideas, "not as western, but as [there] own, and upon this basis . . . [were] cultivating [their] own distinctive tradition and art."

and even embarrassing to the traditional missionary community.<sup>61</sup> Its conclusion was clear: Protestant missions were now at a “fork in the road” and fundamental changes needed to be made.<sup>62</sup> Missions still had an important role to play, but many of their original goals and methods, and their disregard for local cultures were no longer valid.

As a starting point, the role of the missionary as an evangelist seeking to save the world for Christ needed to be replaced by a more ecumenical, humanitarian view. Missionaries should no longer stress the claims of Christianity over non-Christian religions and should enter into a genuine cultural dialogue.<sup>63</sup> The different Christian messages from the multiple denominations needed to be simplified and made common, with less emphasis upon doctrine.<sup>64</sup> The work of educational and medical enterprises should be continued, but the separate, often competing, efforts of the different Protestant denominations needed to be coordinated and freed from all proselytizing.<sup>65</sup>

The response of the denominations that had originally cooperated in the study was immediate. In general, they denounced the findings and committed themselves to continuing their evangelistic efforts. Methodist reactions were mixed and less extreme in their rejection of the findings. One gathering of missionaries in China actually found the results “objective and constructive.”<sup>66</sup> For the liberals who had raised the original questions, the report served to validate and strengthen their calls for change.<sup>67</sup> Possibly the most tangible result of the inquiry was that the conclusions were used by the Rockefeller Foundation to coordinate and direct their funding of future mission projects.

Snell had come independently to many of the same conclusions as the study. He never abandoned his Methodist roots, but during his years in China, he had grown to respect the culture of China. Fred Snell, his youngest son, recalled that while he was growing up, he and his father would occasionally visit the countryside. “We visited points of interest like Buddhist temples where we were always welcomed and served tea. I would listen to my father talk to the priests and they to him. He was always respectful of

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<sup>61</sup> Hocking, 29.

<sup>62</sup> Hocking, 1-28. The author summarizes the study findings and proposes an alternate approach to evangelizing, a process of “planting a seed” rather than maintaining permanent organizations.

<sup>63</sup> Hocking, 82-84. The author detailed an “ideal method” where a “universal Church” would emerge based upon dialog among the world’s various cultures and religions.

<sup>64</sup> Hocking, 92-96. It was suggested that one goal might be a National Christian Church for each country.

<sup>65</sup> Hocking, 60-78.

<sup>66</sup> Jan van Lin, *Shaking the Fundamentals: Religious Plurality and Ecumenical Movement* (New York: Editions Rodopi B.V., 1994), 131-147. See also Harold Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism: The Challenge to Christian Faith and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 40-41.

<sup>67</sup> Among many others, Pearl S. Buck, herself the daughter of a missionary, supported the findings of the report.

their beliefs.”<sup>68</sup> Snell also recommended that his grown children read *My Country and My People* by Lin Yutang, a native Chinese.<sup>69</sup> The popular book attempted to bridge the cultural gap between the East and the West. The Snell children had grown up in China, but had received the missionary version of Chinese culture as inferior.

In 1934, Snell’s older sister Maud (Snell) Chandler was beginning an extended working visit with her brother in China. She wrote to her family in the United States, “John has gotten very Chinese in lots of his thinking and the way he likes China. Well, you must not say much [negative] about China if you want him to respect your judgment.”<sup>70</sup>

The second influential book was *Love, the Law of Life*.<sup>71</sup> During the months before his unexpected death, Snell experienced an epiphany on the subject of love. He wrote to his children with the enthusiasm of a recent convert, “You will think your old dad has gone crazy on the subject of LOVE. . . . But too much emphasis cannot be put on this word.”<sup>72</sup> During his years in China, he had not been a person to evangelize or use the word “Love,” not even with his family. What had happened?

In one of his last letters, Snell referred to the work of Toyohiko Kagawa to explain his new-found concept of Christian love:

Kagawa is the man who is setting Japan on fire. The man has the secret of social success and international brotherhood. He preaches the core (LOVE) of Christianity and when we all learn how to practice it, then we may call ourselves Christians. . . . We Christians, although Love is the very core of Christ’s teaching, do not yet realize or know the real meaning of the word.<sup>73</sup>

Kagawa was a Japanese convert to Christianity. Born in 1888, he was educated at the Presbyterian Seminary in Tokyo and later attended Princeton Theological Seminary. After leaving Princeton, he returned to Japan and worked as an evangelist, social reformer, and pacifist. Through his work and his writings, Kagawa gained recognition outside Japan and toured widely, including speaking tours to China and America.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>68</sup> Fred M. Snell, *Some Remembrances of Fred M. Snell* (Self published, February, 2000), Chapter 4, p. 3 (in possession of the author).

<sup>69</sup> John A. Snell, letter to Raymond Snell dated February 16, 1936.

<sup>70</sup> Maud Snell Chandler, letter dated July 28, 1934 from Soochow.

<sup>71</sup> Toyohiko Kagawa, *Love, the Law of Life* (Philadelphia: The John C. Winston Company, 1929).

<sup>72</sup> John A. Snell, letter to Raymond Snell dated February 16, 1936.

<sup>73</sup> John A. Snell, letter to Raymond Snell dated February 16, 1936. Others in the family were also writing about Kagawa. John Darr, a son-in-law who was living with the Snell family in Soochow, wrote supporting Kagawa’s views on racial equality in a letter of February 10, 1936. Another letter, written by Dr. Snell’s daughter, Martha, on February 15, 1936, from Vanderbilt University, reported that she had heard Kagawa speak and, as a result, was working to establish a cooperative.

<sup>74</sup> Toyohiko Kagawa enrolled in a Bible class in Japan primarily to learn English, but he soon became a Christian. After completing his seminary studies, he lived and worked in the slums of Kobe, drawing attention to the plight of poor Japanese. He also supported universal suffrage in Japan and was a founder of the Japanese Federation of Labor. He was an outspoken pacifist who in 1940 apologized for Japan’s imperialistic policy in China and was imprisoned. After World War II, he continued his work for the democratization of his country and for women’s rights. In 1954 and 1955, he was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. He died in 1960.

In 1929, Kagawa's book, *Love, the Law of Life*, became available in an English translation. In the book, Kagawa described the many forms of love and concluded,

Ultimately all men will become aware that there is no Lord but Love. Love awakes from within. Love will arouse all men. Love whispers in that man's ear; it whispers to this man's heart. Love calls all to awake.<sup>75</sup>

Kagawa's book had already helped to awaken Snell's spirit, moving love from his intellect to his emotions, from his head to his heart. Kagawa also taught a pragmatic form of Christianity, preaching a gospel that had little patience for the technicalities of religious doctrine:

The God of Jesus is a God of Action. People who stay at home and read their Bibles and pray and meditate, and do nothing for the poor who beg help before their very doors—such people will find the God of Jesus unintelligible . . . . The loveless do not know God . . . . Only through the active movement of love will [they] intuitively come to know the God of Action.<sup>76</sup>

Similarly, Snell cautioned his children that Love was too abstract to be useful; it must be "illustrated in concrete terms and examples." He charged each of his children to find a way to live and work Love. He directed his son Raymond, "Take your chosen profession and relate it around this great theme. Live LOVE and work sanitary engineering."<sup>77</sup>

Like his ancestors, Snell was a strong-willed man. He didn't change his mind easily, but once he did, he embraced his new beliefs completely. As a missionary, he had traveled to China to relieve suffering and save the heathens, but once there, China had transformed him. Similarly, many in the missionary community eventually realized that China had enjoyed a mature, principled culture long before the first Christian missionaries arrived. Through dialog, they began to appreciate that this ancient culture actually shared most of the same humanistic beliefs that they had come to teach.

### **Death: A Final Lesson in Love**

Dr. Snell's heavy workload continued. In December of 1935, just before she departed from China, his sister Maud Chandler lamented, "I wish we could have had more time together since I have been here. John has been so very busy all the time." She reflected on changes she had observed in her brother: "John is like his father in so many ways, but he is not cultivating the traits that we all think are so disagreeable. When he is old like father, he will be a much 'lover' character."<sup>78</sup> Little did she know that her brother would die three months later.

John Snell's death came unexpectedly, but in the line of duty. The fol-

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<sup>75</sup> Toyohiko Kagawa, *Love*, 311.

<sup>76</sup> Toyohiko Kagawa, "The Knowledge of God," available at < <http://www.abccog.org/kagawa1.htm>>

<sup>77</sup> John A. Snell, letter to Raymond dated February 16, 1936. Raymond had recently completed his Master's Degree in Civil Engineering, specializing in sanitary engineering.

<sup>78</sup> Maud Snell Chandler, letter dated December 1, 1935, from Soochow.

lowing account describes his last hours:

On March 2, 1936, Soochow Hospital and the Methodist Mission suffered an irreparable loss in the death of Dr. John A. Snell. On Monday, February 24, he had half a dozen operations scheduled. After the first he had to call for a chair and rest a few minutes. In spite of a temperature of 102, he drove through with the second. The next morning he was removed to the hospital and a fight began for his life, the local doctors calling in their colleagues from Huchow and Chanchow Hospitals of the same mission. But all efforts to save his life were in vain. . . . The cemetery chapel was far too small to hold the throng that gathered to pay a last tribute to a man whose surgical skill had saved many of their lives.<sup>79</sup>

On his deathbed, Snell dictated a set of notes to his oldest daughter Dorothy. The first dealt with various family financial matters. When he finished with these, he left a final message for his children:

I want you to know . . . that if I could live my life over, I would give it to China. But I would fill it full of love. What China needs is love—and Christianity is love. There can be nothing happier than a life whose first purpose is to demonstrate Christian love through service.

If I could live again, I would go out on the canals and footpaths of the countryside and take beyond the walls of this hospital the great message of love that lives in this work. China needs all of it that she can get. Will you tell them this, Dorothy? Tell them that this is the GOOD life.<sup>80</sup>

Snell's death left the community in shock. His family, friends, and colleagues walked around in a daze and asked, "Is Dr. Snell dead? What will we do? Is Soo E-sang dead? How can that be?"<sup>81</sup>

Word of Snell's death spread quickly. A cablegram reached the Board of Missions in Nashville on March 2: "SNELL DIED MONDAY—PNEUMONIA." The Board forwarded a news release to *The New York Times* which printed a prominent notice in their March 3rd edition. The Board also telegraphed the news to family members in the States, including several children who were attending college.<sup>82</sup>

In her autobiography, Grace Snell wrote of her husband's death. "John was a wonderful man, strong in body and mind, an exceptional doctor and an especially fine surgeon. He was loved by all the foreigners and Chinese alike. He had many perplexing problems, but he was always able to see them through."<sup>83</sup> Snell's unexpected death left his family in difficult financial straits. The Methodist Missionary Society continued to support Grace at a modest level for the rest of her life, but most of the family's savings were tied up in his brick factory and the dairy. Without Dr. Snell's stewardship and with the political and military chaos in China in the late 1930s, the in-

<sup>79</sup> "Dr. John A. Snell of Soochow," *The China Christian Advocate* (April, 1936).

<sup>80</sup> John A. Snell. The conversation was recorded by Robert M. and Katherine Paty and later published as "The Good Life." Dr. Robert Morris Paty was a medical missionary in Changzhou which is near Soochow. He likely had travelled to Soochow upon hearing of Snell's illness.

<sup>81</sup> Grace Birkett Snell, *The Life of Grace Birkett Snell*, 71.

<sup>82</sup> The United Methodist Archives Center microfilm.

<sup>83</sup> Grace Birkett Snell, *The Life of Grace Birkett Snell*, 70.



vestments soon became worthless.<sup>84</sup>

### **Dr. Snell's Legacy**

It is interesting to speculate on how Snell's new-found love would have changed his life and work, particularly in the turbulent times that followed. Shortly after his death, Soochow was occupied by the Japanese for the duration of WWII. Following the war, China experienced the rise and fall of the Nationalist government, the emergence of the People's Republic, the Cultural Revolution, the reopening of China, and most recently, the country's meteoric economic growth. These events make it difficult to link the work of Snell to the current hospital.

While the cemetery where Snell was buried was razed sometime after 1940, and his remains were lost, his legacy of love and care for the people of Soochow is a deep and abiding presence. Over the past half-century, Snell's hospital, which is now known as The First Affiliated Hospital of Soochow University, has grown significantly in size and in the services it provides. The main building is a thoroughly modern, western-style teaching hospital with the latest high-tech equipment from around the world. There is a separate building which offers traditional Chinese medical procedures in a modern setting. The hospital is self-supporting with a completely Chinese staff. The Christian church where Dr. Snell and his family attended services remains part of the hospital grounds and is quite active—a modest, yet fitting legacy to a singular human being and to the larger missionary movement of which he was part.

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<sup>84</sup> Nationalist and Communist forces were engaged in a civil war, and the Japanese were in the process of occupying the country.