

## LIZZIE, THE MISSIONARY WORKER

JACK L. NEWSOME

Every region has had its heroes of the faith who lived their lives in such a way that they not only served their own age, but continued to capture the imaginations of people long after their earthly lives were ended.

Two such persons who came readily to mind for United Methodists in Illinois are Peter Cartwright and Bishop Joseph Hartzell. However, one in the state, who is not so popularly known and yet whose life has continued to inspire those who know about her, is Lizzie Johnson who lived more than a century ago and who died in 1909.

For the greater part of her life, Johnson was confined to her bed in her family's home in Casey, Illinois. The illness that placed her there and the global impact she was to make in those years of confinement are a story that bears retelling.

Two early books were written by Johnson. The first, *From Pillow to Throne*,<sup>1</sup> was the work of C. W. Jacobs, a former pastor and friend to the family. Six months before her death, Lizzie placed her journal into the hands of this beloved pastor, saying to him at the time, "Do what you think best with it. It includes no personal history of myself from 1900 to the present. I am too weak and worn to finish the last nine or ten years."<sup>2</sup>

The first section of the book contains excerpts from Lizzie's journal, interwoven with personal commentary by Jacobs. The second section, rather than continuing with her life's story, focuses, through letters of appreciation, on the impact that her life up until that time had already had upon others.

The second source is *The Story of Lizzie L. Johnson*, written by Bishop Francis Wesley Warne of the Methodist Episcopal Church.<sup>3</sup> Coming to know her in 1904, only some five years before her death, Bishop Warne did much to make her name known literally around the world.

Lizzie Johnson's story begins in the middle of the last century. In 1859 just before the Civil War began, John W. Johnson and Mary C. Johnson, the parents of Lizzie Johnson, arrived in Terre Haute, Indiana, along with Mrs.

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<sup>1</sup>Charles W. Jacobs, *From Pillow to Throne*, Copyright 1910 by M. Alice Johnson. No publisher recorded in the volume. It is available from the Archives Library, Central Illinois Annual Conference, Bloomington, Illinois.

<sup>2</sup>Lizzie Johnson's journal is now extinct. All quotes from her journal are taken from the book by Charles W. Jacobs, *From Pillow to Throne*.

<sup>3</sup>Francis Wesley Warne, *The Story of Lizzie L. Johnson* (New York and Cincinnati: Abingdon Press, 1927).

Johnson's brother. With a baby daughter, the family crossed the Wabash River by ferry and made their way to a large, two-room log cabin belonging to Mrs. Johnson's brother, who resided some eight miles south of Casey, Illinois. There the Johnsons lived for a few months until they could build their own house. They lived in that house for nine years, during which time three children were born. The farm on which they lived was not located within easy access for the children to attend school, so in the autumn of 1868 the Johnson family moved to Casey.

On May 22, 1869, another child was born, Lizzie Louvira. Later, Alice, a younger sister, was born. The whole family consisted of four daughters and one son. The father became a lumber merchant and the youngest daughter, Alice, devoted a significant part of her life to the care of her sister, as well as her mother and father in the latter years of their lives.

There is every indication that the first thirteen years of Lizzie Johnson's life were happy and normal. The loves of her life were music, nature, and education. A picture of Lizzie, taken probably in her later teens, reflects a pleasant and very attractive young woman.

In January 1882, a few months before her thirteenth birthday, Lizzie was suddenly seized with an illness, spinal in nature, that was to render her an invalid by the time she was twenty. According to records, she was never able to raise her head from her pillow after 1890. In that condition, for the remaining nineteen years, she lived confined to one room, never again to be free of pain.

Neither Lizzie nor her family easily accepted her condition. The very best in medical attention was sought. In the hope that a change of climate might be helpful, they took a trip to Florida one winter with the family physician. All such efforts were to end, however, on a disappointing note. Some of her deep feelings and struggles during these years of declining health are captured in these words from her journal,

For many years my bed stood by the window through which I could see the school grounds and buildings, where I began my school life. Day after day, from the beginning to the close of school terms, I watched the scholars and keenly regretted my inability to be one of their number. My parents had always taught their children that education was very essential. It was painful to me to realize my youth was slipping away and time and opportunity were passing. When I was a child long before my illness, my mother often told me that when I became old enough she expected to place me in one of the best schools of music and keep me there till graduation. I was fairly aflame with ambition to continue my music when I became ill. Mother knew of my eagerness and during the first few years of my illness, she would cheer me when I was discouraged by referring to the musical education which she hoped awaited me. As time passed and prospects of recovery diminished, the subject was mentioned less frequently and finally not at all, but the fond ambition would not die and lurked in my bosom for years; and the love of music yet lives in my soul.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Jacobs, no page number.

Continuing, she wrote: "The thought of never being more than an invalid caused me to shudder and grow sick at heart. My fierce determination to recover my health almost embittered my heart."<sup>5</sup>

To sense something of Lizzie Johnson's pain and frustration and to know something of her hopes and dreams, which were never realized, makes one realize how remarkable was her life.

How did it happen that as her life at the age of twenty-one was sinking into what seemed like oblivion, she, by the time she died twenty years later, had become a household name for many, not only in America, but in many other countries of the world?

To be sure, other persons played significant roles in her life—her parents and family, especially her younger sister, Alice, several key friends, pastors, and church officials. Along with the support from all of them was her own deep and abiding faith in God.

Just as she was sinking into the throes of deepest doubt and depression, two things happened that renewed her spirit and gave her a purpose for living. First, through the ministry at that time of the presiding elder of the Mattoon District of the Central Illinois Conference, the Reverend James T. Orr, she was introduced to the work of missions, under the auspices of the Methodist Episcopal Church, and in particular to the life and work of Bishop William Taylor who was at that time assigned to Africa.

The second thing that happened was an experience that changed her attitude forever. It came at a time when she was continuing to struggle with the acceptance of her condition. Her great longing to be free from suffering persisted and was almost overwhelming at times.

In the midst of that struggle she wrote,

Vivid in my mind is the memory of a night when weariness, nervousness, and headache prevented sleep. I felt as I had on previous occasions, a sincere sorrow of soul, a keen sense of sin, a need of Jesus as my personal Savior. As I prayed, this question came, 'Are you willing to consent to a life of suffering?' The question was a trying one. At that moment my desire was to be released from suffering, to be strong and independent was fairly consuming. Must I consent to such a lot? My heart cried out, 'Are you Willing?' came the answer clear and strong. The struggle was hard indeed, but my heart yielded and I was able to say, 'Yes, Lord, if it be thy will.' Rebellion fled from my heart, joy filled my soul, sweet sleep came. When I woke in the morning, everything and everybody looked different to me. My soul was light in the Lord, my heart had in it a new hope, my life a new purpose. From that night in May 1890, the night I answered 'yes' to God, I date my conversion.<sup>6</sup>

Those two things, a growing interest in missions, centering on Bishop Taylor's efforts to place little girls in Africa into missions, and her "consecration" experience led to the making of her now well-known quilt. Desiring so much to fill someone else's life with, as she put it, "sunshine" and thinking

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<sup>5</sup>Jacobs.

<sup>6</sup>Jacobs.

specifically in her words of “the little black girls in Africa bound down by the superstition of heathenism,” the thought came to her mind, “Make a quilt, sell it and give the proceeds to missions. It may be the means of redeeming one of the girls.”<sup>7</sup> So for the next six months, she with the assistance of her mother, who held the patches while Lizzie sewed, the quilt, a “crazy quilt” it was called because of its many oddly shaped patterns, took shape.

The work, by her own account was not easy:

Some days I almost fainted into insensibility under the amount of work that fell into my hands. I was often very ill from overexertion. On recovery I would press on with new courage. I worked until sheer exhaustion compelled me to stop. Many times I worked until my hands were so sore and stiffened at the close of my day’s work that I did not have proper use of them. Evening after evening mother bathed my hands in hot water and applied hamamelis to relieve the condition and thereby render my fingers sufficiently nimble to resume work the following morning.<sup>8</sup>

That quilt hangs today in a protective case in the First United Methodist Church of Casey. When one takes note of the thousands of stitches that it took to make it, one cannot help but think of all the pain and suffering that went into it with the hope that it might bring some “sunshine” into someone’s life.

But for all of the effort and pain, the quilt did not sell. No one bought it. For the next fourteen years, in fact, it stayed folded in a corner of the room.

But fortunately, and one is almost inclined to say, miraculously, that was not the end of the story of the quilt. In 1904, Bishop Francis Wesley Warne, who had been elected to the episcopacy in 1900 with an assignment to Illinois, as well as India, was besieged by a number of people to visit a totally bedridden woman in Casey by the name of Lizzie Johnson, who had a great love for missions. In his book about Lizzie, Bishop Warne described the day he took a train from Chicago to Casey and walked down Main Street until he came to the little house where Lizzie lived.

What impact Bishop Warne had on Lizzie we do not know, but there is no question as to her life and influence on his. That day changed Bishop Warne’s life. Before departing he saw the quilt and inquired about it. Learning its story and why Lizzie made it, he asked if he might borrow it.

A book could be written about that quilt. For over the next twenty years, it circled the world three times, and the story of Lizzie Johnson was told on every continent of the globe. Bishop Warne estimated that \$100,000 was raised during that time through the quilt for the cause of missions. But far greater than the money raised was the inspiration that came to thousands in this country and in the remote corners of the world from the life and Christian commitment of Lizzie Johnson.

But the quilt was only a rather small part of Lizzie’s commitment to the cause of missions. With the failure to sell the quilt in 1891, she did not fold

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<sup>7</sup>Jacobs.

<sup>8</sup>Jacobs.

her hands and quit. After a time of some discouragement, she soon thought of other ways that she could put her life to use for the love of her life—missions.

This time the idea came from her brother, Charles. Visiting with her in her room one day, he happened to notice a bookmark that she had placed aside. Catching sight of the ribbon he asked, "What have you there? Is it a ribbon bookmark?"

"He took it and examined it with interest, his face growing thoughtful all the while," she later wrote. Then he asked, "Why don't you prepare a number of bookmarks similar to this, sell them, and give the proceeds to missions? The work would afford you mental employment, and at the same time you would be aiding foreign missions."

The suggestion slowly took root, but it was not an easy decision for her to reach. As she wrote in her journal, "Such a work would require some means, some business management, much hard work, and heavy correspondence." Her mother did not encourage her for she knew Lizzie's weakness and the suffering it would unavoidably cause.

During subsequent days, Lizzie struggled with making a decision. She had another face-to-face encounter with her Lord in which she finally said yes. "Decision Day," she called it thereafter.

Incidentally, she only wrote of two such close encounters. She didn't dwell on them. Both came at times when she was struggling most deeply with her life and what she was to do next, and both launched her into the most mission-caring enterprises one can imagine.

We would be mistaken to think that this was some small occasional enterprise that Lizzie did at her leisure. From the very beginning, she saw it as a daily business. It became an enterprise of no small proportions. Over the years, she raised a profit of over \$25,000 for the cause of missions. (When one remembers that this was at the turn of the century when the *New York Times* sold for one cent, the equivalent of that in today's money would be many times that amount.)

Keeping in mind that she sold the bookmarks for 10¢, 15¢, and 25¢ each, and remembering also the cost of having the ribbons printed, the bookmarks made and mailed, it is estimated that, with her sister's (Alice) assistance, she had to make at least 250,000 bookmarks to realize the profit for missions.

In addition to the work of the bookmarks, there were the increasing number of letters that had to be written. As the awareness of Lizzie Johnson increased, so did the number of letters she received. She insisted on responding to all of them personally at first, two to three hundred a month. Only later, when the load became too great, did she consider using the assistance of someone else with the correspondence. She was fortunate to secure the services of Mabel Kennedy, a childhood friend.

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<sup>9</sup>Jacobs.

It was a good match. As Lizzie wrote in her journal, "She [Mabel] was delighted to render any assistance she could and was quick, quiet, competent. She wrote as I dictated and accomplished much, so long as I could endure the labor, for dictating was new work for me. I was not accustomed to having anyone in my room any great length of time." After her visits, Lizzie continued, "I would, if strength permitted, spend hours in sorting, listing, and wrapping bookmarks to accompany the letters written during the afternoon. I worked until late and did not dare pause to ask myself whether I was too weary to work longer. Self was subordinate to my thoughts. Had it not been so the work could never have been accomplished."<sup>10</sup>

"I have," she wrote, "sent bookmarks to every state in the union, also to Mexico, Canada, Scotland, England, Italy, Sweden, Austria, India, Madeira, Turkey, Africa, South America, New Zealand, Hawaii, China, and Japan. I began this work a little more than fourteen years ago and have worked very hard as I lie upon my bed of pain and am thankful to God for the opportunity of so doing. The profits resulting from my bookmarks go to maintain native workers in foreign lands. The work overtaxes my strength, yet I am anxious to toil on and do all I can to enable these native pastors and Bible women to continue their work of soul saving."<sup>11</sup>

A page out of her account book for 1906 provides a good summary of her work and its results:

Account for 1906

Received .....	\$2,333.99
Disbursement:	
For support of (7) pastor teachers in India, at \$60 each per annum .....	420.00
Support of pastor-teachers in India per annum .....	100.00
Two Bible Women in India at \$50 each per annum .....	100.00
Support of Bible Women in India per annum .....	40.00
Support (2) Bible women in China at \$20 each per annum.....	40.00
Support of native pastor in Africa, per annum .....	50.00
Support of (3) scholarships in Japan at \$15.00 each per annum.....	45.00
Support of Bible-readers in Maderia Island per annum .....	100.00
Bookmarks purchased .....	#15074
Cost of bookmarks .....	514.80
Letters written    931.	Cards written    290
Bookmarks in stock Dec. 31st    12,883	
Cash in bank .....	\$3827.30 <sup>12</sup>

There are countless stories that have their inception from the life of Lizzie Johnson. Each life that she touched stood ripe for the possibility for

<sup>10</sup>Jacobs.

<sup>11</sup>Warne, 65.

<sup>12</sup>Warne, 64.

new stories to arise. Like the ripple caused by a pebble thrown into the water, the influence from her life continued to spread.

One such story will have to suffice. Takuo Matsumato of Japan in early boyhood was taken into the Methodist mission schools of Japan and educated by the funds from the sale of the bookmarks made by Lizzie Johnson. He was an outstanding pupil. He came to the United States and took higher college degrees in this country. He became president of a Methodist mission school located in Nagasaki, where 1,700 girls were enrolled. When the atom bomb destroyed the city, 350 girls in that school were killed. Matsumato himself was severely injured and his wife killed. After the Second World War, Mr. Matsumato, in the interest of reconciliation and peace, visited in this country. His itinerary happened to bring him to Champaign, Illinois, where quite by coincidence Lizzie's sister, Alice, was in attendance. Discovering who she was and learning that she was the sister of his early benefactor, Mr. Matsumato was overcome. He asked if he could go to Casey and place flowers on Lizzie's grave. At her grave site he found a simple stone marker with these words engraved upon it: "Lizzie, The Missionary Worker."<sup>13</sup>

Takuo Matsumato was just one of many whose life had been significantly touched by that "Missionary Worker," who somehow managed to bring a great amount of "sunshine" into a world while confined to a darkened room. How far the ripples from that one life have spread!

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<sup>13</sup>Louise Campbell, Personal Christmas Letter. November 25, 1986. It is available from the Archives Library, Casey United Methodist Church, Casey, Illinois.