



Opening Oubangui-Chari

JAMES GRIBBLE
AND THE PIONEER MISSIONARIES
OF CENTRAL AFRICA

CELEBRATING 100 YEARS //
A VISUAL RETROSPECTIVE



The western section of the Central African Republic is considered one of the most evangelized areas in the world. Missionaries representing the Charis Alliance¹ were among the first to arrive in the region, and their story of commitment and sacrifice ranks among the most inspiring of the Modern Era of Protestant Missions. This booklet seeks to retell the story in a fresh and meaningful way by combining the (slightly edited) words of one of the pioneers, Orville Jobson, with many original photos now archived with Encompass World Partners. It is our prayer that this account will move many parents to release their children in a new wave of pioneer missions, and that a new generation of missionaries will focus their best years and energies to repeating this story among the remaining least-reached people groups of our world.

Dave Guiles
Executive Director,
Encompass World Partners


Text by Orville Jobson, member of the second wave of pioneer missionaries. Taken from his book, *Conquering Oubangui-Chari for Christ*, The Brethren Missionary Herald: Winona Lake, 1957. Picture research and captions by Dave Guiles
Layout and Design by Evangela Creative

¹ The Charis Alliance is a global fraternity of churches that traces its origins to Alexander Mack of Schwarzenau, Germany (1708). Until recently, it was best known as The Fellowship of Grace Brethren Churches.

TO APPRECIATE THE WAY IN WHICH GOD WROUGHT TO OPEN THIS TERRITORY FOR EVANGELIZATION, ONE MUST KNOW SOMETHING ABOUT THE MAN GOD USED TO ACCOMPLISH HIS PURPOSE. THE HISTORY OF GOD'S DEALINGS DOWN THROUGH THE AGES IS THE HISTORY OF MEN HE CHOSE TO ACCOMPLISH HIS WILL AND PURPOSE. TO DELIVER ISRAEL FROM THE BONDAGE OF EGYPT, HE CALLED MOSES. TO SUBDUE THE LAND OF CANAAN, HE CHOSE JOSHUA. TO PROVIDE AN APOSTLE TO THE GENTILES, HE LAID HOLD UPON PAUL. TO LAUNCH THE MODERN MISSIONARY MOVEMENT, HE CALLED WILLIAM CAREY. AND TO BESIEGE THE DOORS OF OUBANGUI-CHARI, HE CHOSE JAMES GRIBBLE, A MAN EMINENTLY FITTED FOR THE TASK.



The young James Gribble, undated photo



This man of God's choosing was born in a humble farm home near Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania, on a cold night in February 1883. Like many of the Lord's "chosen vessels" he was a child of his mother's prayers. The giving of his life to the Lord as a missionary of the cross was due largely to her devoted influence.

The oldest of a large family, he attended the country schools near his boyhood home and at the age of fifteen distinguished himself in public speaking. At sixteen he began working on neighborhood farms and in nearby manufacturing plants, but continued his education by mail with the Scranton School of Correspondence, which he completed several years later.

James Gribble was an exemplary young man, clean, upright, honest and hard working. His childhood habit of kneeling nightly at his bedside for prayer continued through his early years away from home, but he did not yield his proud and rebellious heart to Christ, until, at the age of twenty-one in the city of Philadelphia, the Holy Spirit wooed him in tender tones: "My son, give Me thy heart," and "Come unto Me and be saved." He made his first public confession of Christ as Savior in the First Brethren Church of Philadelphia and was

baptized by the pastor, Rev. Louis S. Bauman, and received into the fellowship of the church.²

Like the Apostle Paul, who being struck down on the road to Damascus, immediately asked: "Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?" James Gribble was possessed with a burning desire to serve the Lord and was now "ready to 'write his name,'" as he often afterward expressed it, into the Great Commission. For he interpreted "Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature," to mean "Go, James Gribble, into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature."³

The young disciple became an ardent student of the Word of God and was greatly blessed by the ministry of his pastor, a man "mighty in the Scriptures." His hunger for the Word led him to Eaglesmere Bible Conference where God confirmed to His servant that He wanted him to serve Him as a missionary to Africa. From that time on he could truly say with that great French missionary, Coillard, whom he so admired: "My longings take me into a country where no missionary has ever wished to go."⁴ His call was to be a pioneer missionary to preach the gospel where Christ had not been named.

² The more complete story of James' conversion is rather dramatic and involves a deadly accident that occurred while he was conducting a streetcar in Philadelphia. By the next morning, he was ready to become a Christ-follower. Later that day, he was baptized, and by the next evening was offering his life for service in Africa.

³ Florence Newberry Gribble, *Undaunted Hope* (Ashland, Ohio: Brethren Publishing Company, 1932), p. 6.

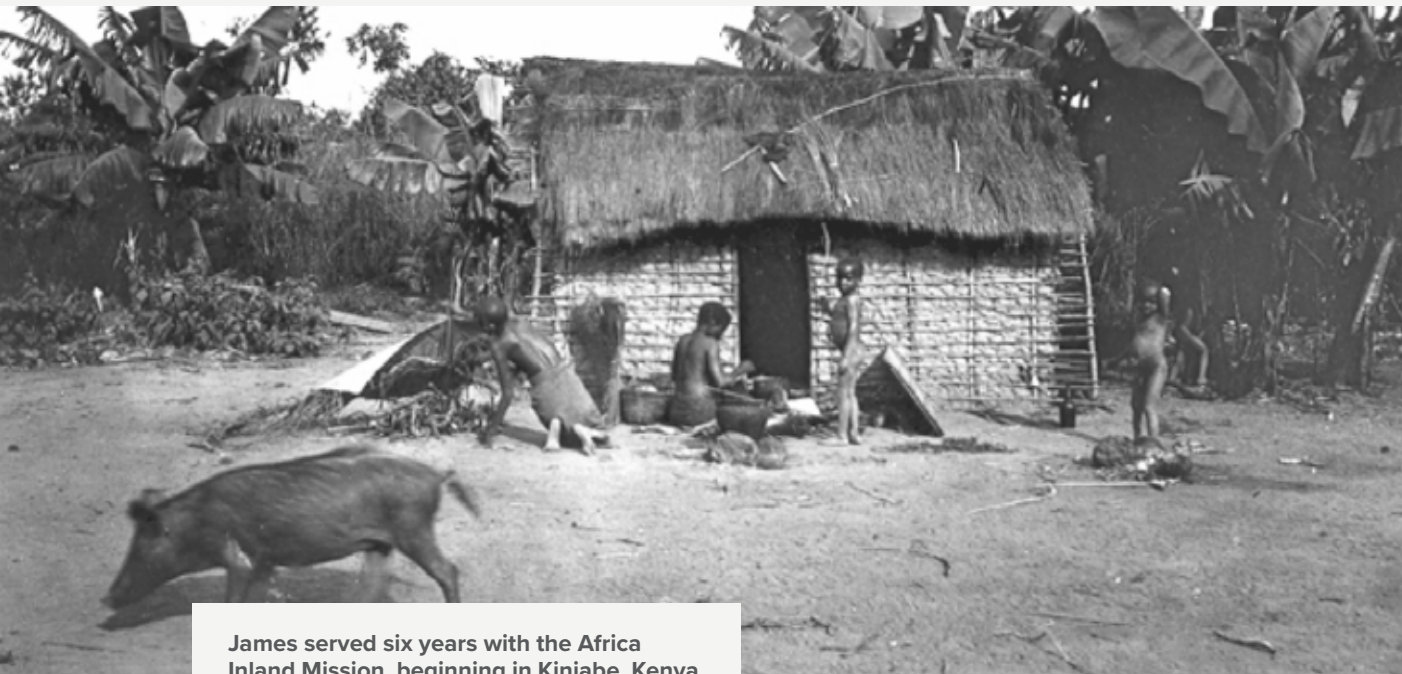
⁴ *ibid.*, p. 7.



The young Florence Newberry, upon receiving her degree as a doctor in homeopathic medicine from Hahnemann Hospital, 1906

The young Volunteer made his desire known to his pastor, Rev. L. S. Bauman, but the Brethren Church had no mission in Africa at that time, so he turned to the Africa Inland Mission. When this mission heartily approved his application, he looked to the Lord in faith to provide his outfit and passage. Some of his first lessons in faith were learned at that time. God provided for His servant in a marvelous way. When the time for sailing had come, he had only sufficient funds for the journey to England, but at the last minute, even after he had boarded the vessel in New York, a man came rushing on board with a small bag of English gold coins worth at that time \$250, just enough to pay his passage from England to Africa.

James Gribble sailed from New York on October 31, 1908, in a party of three. The other two were Rev. Charles E. Hurlburt, director of the Africa Inland Mission, and Dr. Florence Newberry, who later became Mrs. Gribble.



James served six years with the Africa Inland Mission, beginning in Kinjabe, Kenya.

Before the end of the year James Gribble was at his post in East Africa. He was then a young man of twenty-five. This term of service was a long one and his activities were varied. He did building, preaching and printing in British Kenya, engaged in exploration with a pioneer party in eastern Belgian Congo and actually opened a new station at Nera in German East Africa. All of this experience stood him in good stead for the still greater work God had in store for him.

*Oh God, purge me, and send me and put me
always into the very thickest of the fight!*

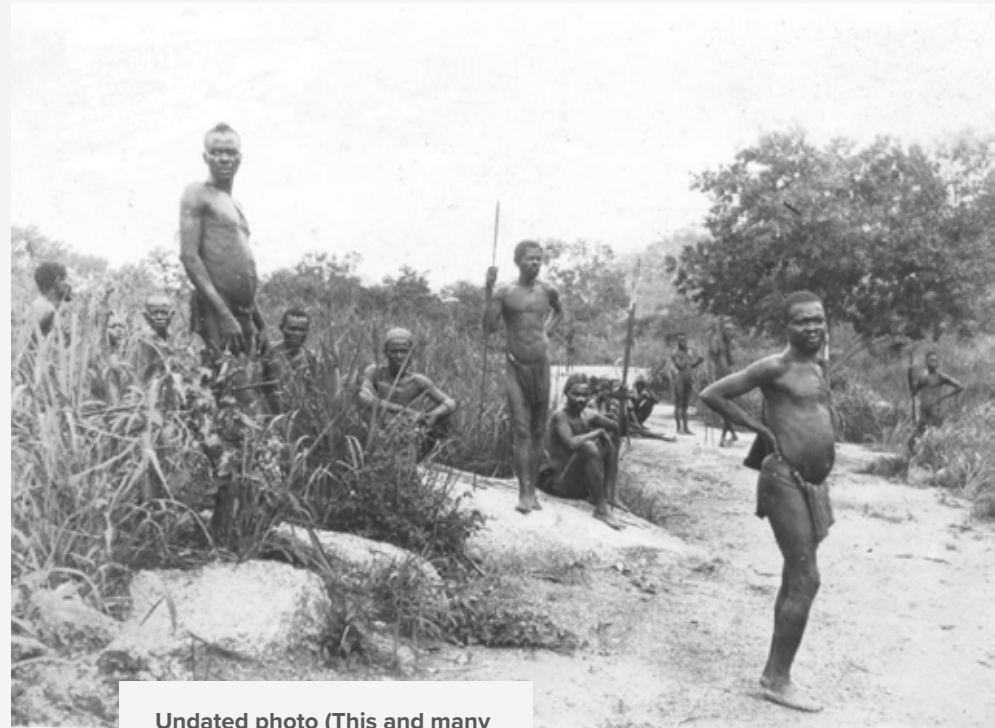
— JAMES GRIBBLE, SEPTEMBER 17, 1910



The world's first 'selfie'— James Gribble taking his own photo outside his carpenter's shop. He used a string to operate the camera shutter.

In late 1910, while opening the new station at Nera, Belgian Congo, the pioneer had a severe attack of blackwater fever which almost ended his life. It was at this time that God gave His servant the vision which was the basis of his call to take the gospel to the unreached tribes of Oubangui-Chari. Because this experience is very important to the history of the mission, we quote his own words:

Death is joyous to a believer, I know, and to depart and be with Christ is far better. For when I lay so ill at Nera on December 3rd, 1910, I seemed to be in the very presence of the Lord and though unspeakably joyous at the prospect of heaven, yet I watered my couch with tears for the lost. I saw pass before me then a panorama of the tribes of West Central Africa, and heard a voice speaking, "Thou shalt be instrumental in carrying the gospel to these."



Undated photo (This and many other photos in this book were taken by James Gribble.)

Then I knew that I was not to die, but live. Then I knew that I had yet many a weary mile to walk for the Lord Jesus. It is exactly with me as though I had been raised from the dead for the evangelization of those very tribes. And now, day by day, I know not where my path may lead—but I will follow on. I would not dwell on this illness, but I can never be too glad for this experience which brought me into such blessed fellowship with the Lord, which taught me that my work was not yet completed, and in which I was given the never-to-be-forgotten vision of bringing the gospel to many tribes who have not a missionary, not a soul to tell them of my Lord.⁵

⁵ Gribble, *Undaunted Hope*, pp. 38-39.

Ten long years were to pass before this vision was to be realized. But this undaunted pioneer believed God and laid hold on that for which he had been laid hold on by Jesus Christ.

Restored to health again, he went about his duties—but the vision did not fade.

I long to go to the darkest and most densely populated region, to a place where not only has the gospel never been preached, but where no one else plans to preach it!

– JAMES GRIBBLE



James and Florence were married at the new mission outpost, Nera, Belgium Congo.

Later he courted and married Florence Newberry, the mission's medical missionary, with whom he had traveled to Africa.⁶

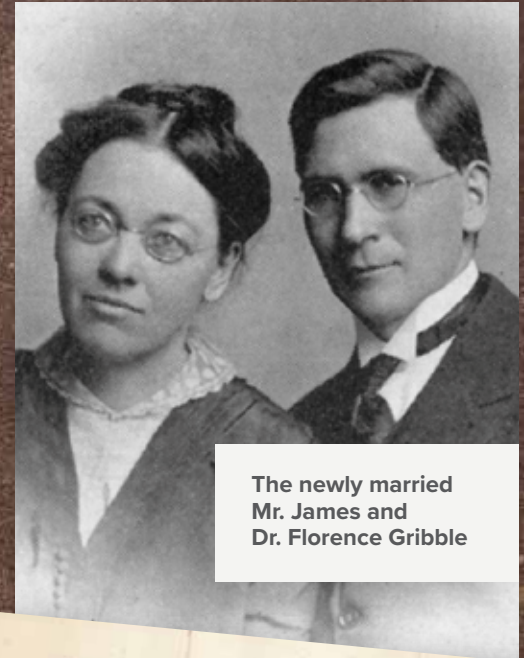
His companion shared with him his call to the unreached tribes of Oubangui-Chari and together they looked to God for the accomplishment of their new mission. This involved severing their connection with the Africa Inland Mission and returning to America on furlough to plan the new advance under the auspices of their own denomination.⁷ In previous correspondence with his pastor, Brother Bauman, he had pledged his heart and word that it would be so.

⁶ Once more, the complete story is rather dramatic. Three times, James had expressed his desire to marry Florence, and three times he was rebuffed. He remained somewhat disillusioned and lovesick until, during a night of prayer, Florence sensed God giving her the freedom to pursue a relationship with James. They were married later that year in the deepest heart of Africa.

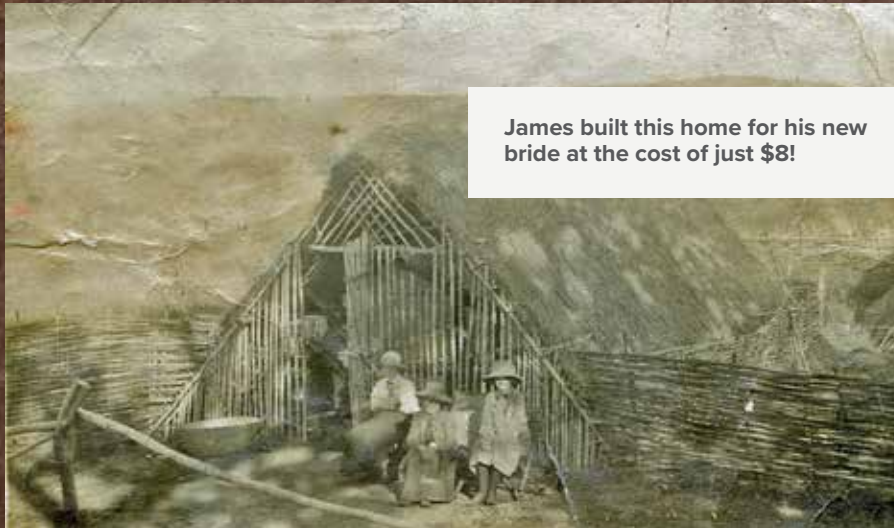
⁷ Florence had fallen violently ill with a ruptured appendix, and almost lost her life. After a lengthy recuperation, the doctor warned that she must return home and never return again to Africa. During the six months required to make the trip back to the United States, James was already making plans for their return – this time to the most remote region he could locate.

Knowing that soon he would be called upon to lead a pioneer party into the unreached tribes of North Central Africa, Mr. Gribble gathered information on this section from all available sources. He learned from a book he acquired that the Sudan United Mission, which was organized in 1904, was proposing the establishing of a chain of Christian mission stations across the Sudan to check the Mohammedan advance into the pagan areas to the south.⁸ He rejoiced to learn that others were working toward the area to which God was calling him, and that his work would be a part of a great advance for Christ.

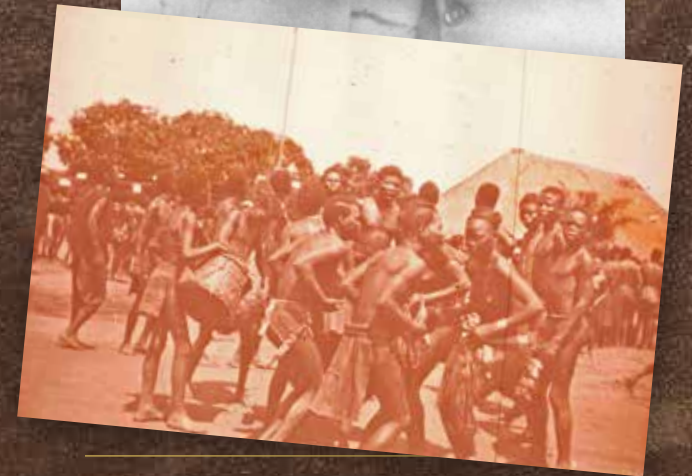
⁸ William J. W. Roome, "A Highway for our God," Annual Report and Review for 1914.



The newly married
Mr. James and
Dr. Florence Gribble



James built this home for his new
bride at the cost of just \$8!



Undated photo



On their furlough

voyage home, the Gribbles visited in South Africa and London meeting a number of missionary leaders from whom they obtained much valuable information concerning their proposed field and mission work in general.

In the vast section to which we hope to go, the influence of Islam is yet practically non-existent. What a barrier to its onward tread a line of stations across that beautiful country would be! ... They are said to be fierce cannibals, but that may be at least a partial exaggeration.

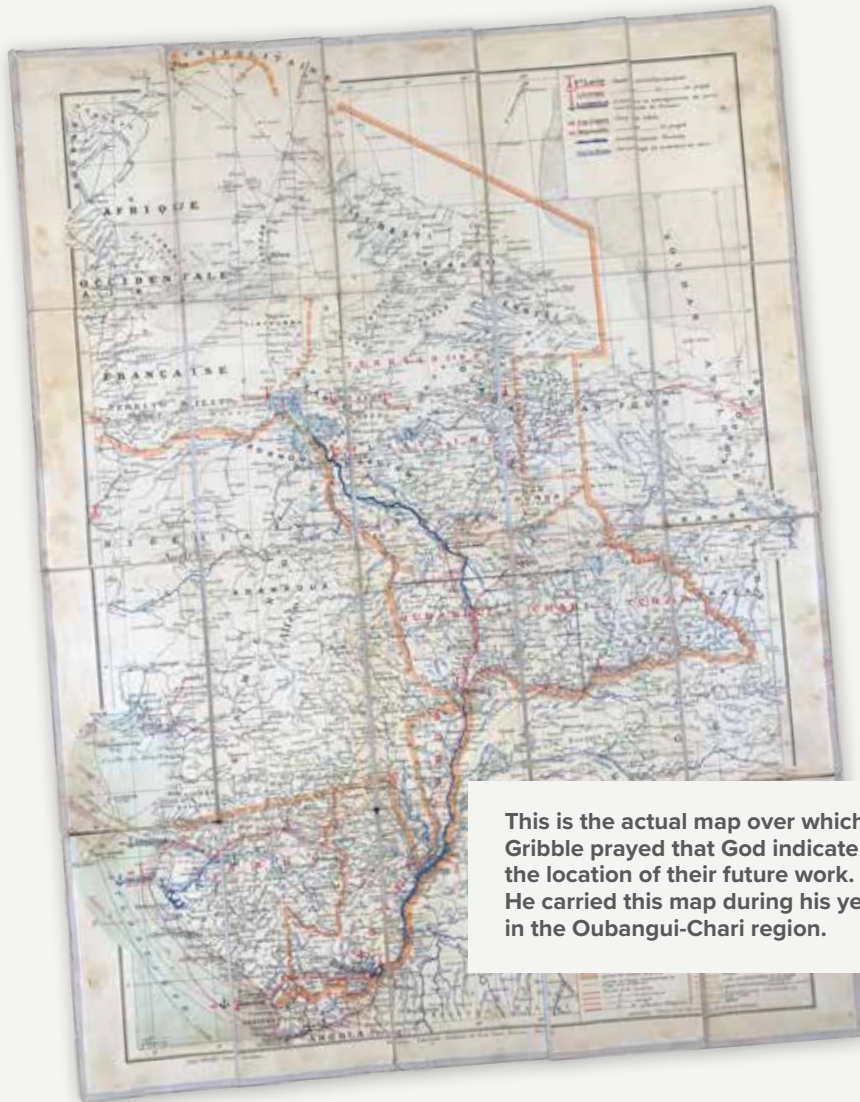
– JAMES GRIBBLE, C. 1913, AS HE JOURNEYED FROM AFRICA TO AMERICA AT THE CONCLUSION OF HIS FIRST ASSIGNMENT WITH THE AFRICA INLAND MISSION. LATER, FLORENCE AND JAMES WOULD JOIN THE FOREIGN MISSIONARY SOCIETY OF THE BRETHREN CHURCH (ENCOMPASS WORLD PARTNERS) TO PIONEER A NEW REGION KNOWN TODAY AS CHAD AND THE CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC.



On October 29, 1915, James and Florence welcomed little Marguerite into the world, born in Chicago at Hahnemann Hospital, the one from which her mother had graduated with her medical degree.

Back in America early in January 1915, the Gribbles began an intense campaign of deputation, challenging Brethren churches from the Atlantic to the Pacific with the call of God to Africa. They made the churches feel their responsibility to the Great Commission of the Lord Jesus Christ. During the three years in which they engaged in this exacting ministry, they walked entirely by faith as they had done even before they sailed for Africa in 1908.

Unfortunately, many of the churches were unresponsive, and only a few shared a real burden for Africa. The offerings were pitifully small. But the faithful ministry of these two bore fruit, and not only did God meet every material need, but raised up volunteers to go forward with them to the task.



This is the actual map over which Gribble prayed that God indicate the location of their future work. He carried this map during his years in the Oubangui-Chari region.

ON SEVERAL OCCASIONS DURING THIS DEPUTATION PERIOD JAMES GRIBBLE INDICATED ON THE MAP OF AFRICA THE PLACE TO WHICH HE FELT GOD WAS CALLING THEM TO OPEN THE FIRST STATION— AND HE ALWAYS POINTED TO THE REGION OF BOZOUM, IN WESTERN OUBANGUI-CHARI.⁹

Finally, in August 1917, the Foreign Missionary Society¹⁰ recommended to the church that North Central Africa be approved as a mission field for the Brethren Church, and that the pioneer party consisting of Rev. and Mrs. James Gribble, Miss Estella C. Myers and Miss Myrtle Mae Snyder be sent forth as soon as final preparations could be made. The mission adopted the name Oubangui-Chari Mission and the slogan “Oubangui-Chari for Christ” became their battle cry.¹¹

⁹ Gribble, *Undaunted Hope*, p. 260.

¹⁰ In 2012, in an effort to remove unnecessary barriers to working in restricted-access countries, the agency was renamed Encompass World Partners.

¹¹ *ibid.*, p.196.

World War I was still raging when the little party was ready to go. In spite of the dangers involved they set out and God provided a way across the sea for His servants. They sailed on the S. S. *City of Cairo* on January 8, 1918, for Cape Town. There they changed ships at the mouth of the Congo and proceeded to Brazzaville, the capital of French Equatorial Africa. They had hoped to continue on to Bangui and across country to Bozoum—the place of God’s choosing—but government officials questioned the advisability of permitting the party to proceed until contact was first made with Paris.

What the party thought might be a wait of a few weeks stretched into a siege of many months. Living quarters were difficult to obtain and they were obliged to move several times. Finally, they erected their tent in a shady grove and built temporary sheds over the tents as a protection from severe sun and rain. They dubbed their primitive quarters “Camp-Wait-Some-More.”

Setting sail on the *City of Cairo*, January 8, 1918. It was one of three ships from the ‘City Line.’ Earlier that year, the other two ships were severely damaged and never reached their destinations.



During the first waiting period of 18 months at Brazzaville. They dubbed it ‘Camp-Wait-Some-More.’



On deck and ready to sail: Estella Myers; James, Marguerite and Florence Gribble; Myrtle Mae Snyder



New Recruits! The Rollier Family arrives at Brazzaville.

During the waiting days many offers were made to the party to open work in nearby Belgian Congo where missionaries were at liberty to evangelize, but except for Miss Snyder, who accepted the offer to help a neighboring mission as a nurse, the group waited it out.

About a year after the party arrived in Brazzaville, Rev. and Mrs. A. Rollier and their two young daughters joined the party. Because Mr. Rollier was of French extraction and spoke French well, this arrival brought new hope that soon permission might be granted to proceed to the interior. New contacts were made but there was little change.

DURING THE SIEGE, PIONEER GRIBBLE WROTE:

*We are knocking at the door of one of the greatest
unreached mission fields in the entire world. The gospel
must, must be preached here ... if we fail to stand true to
the Lord, He will be obliged to use others to do this work.¹²*

– JAMES GRIBBLE

¹² Gribble, *Undaunted Hope*, p. 188.

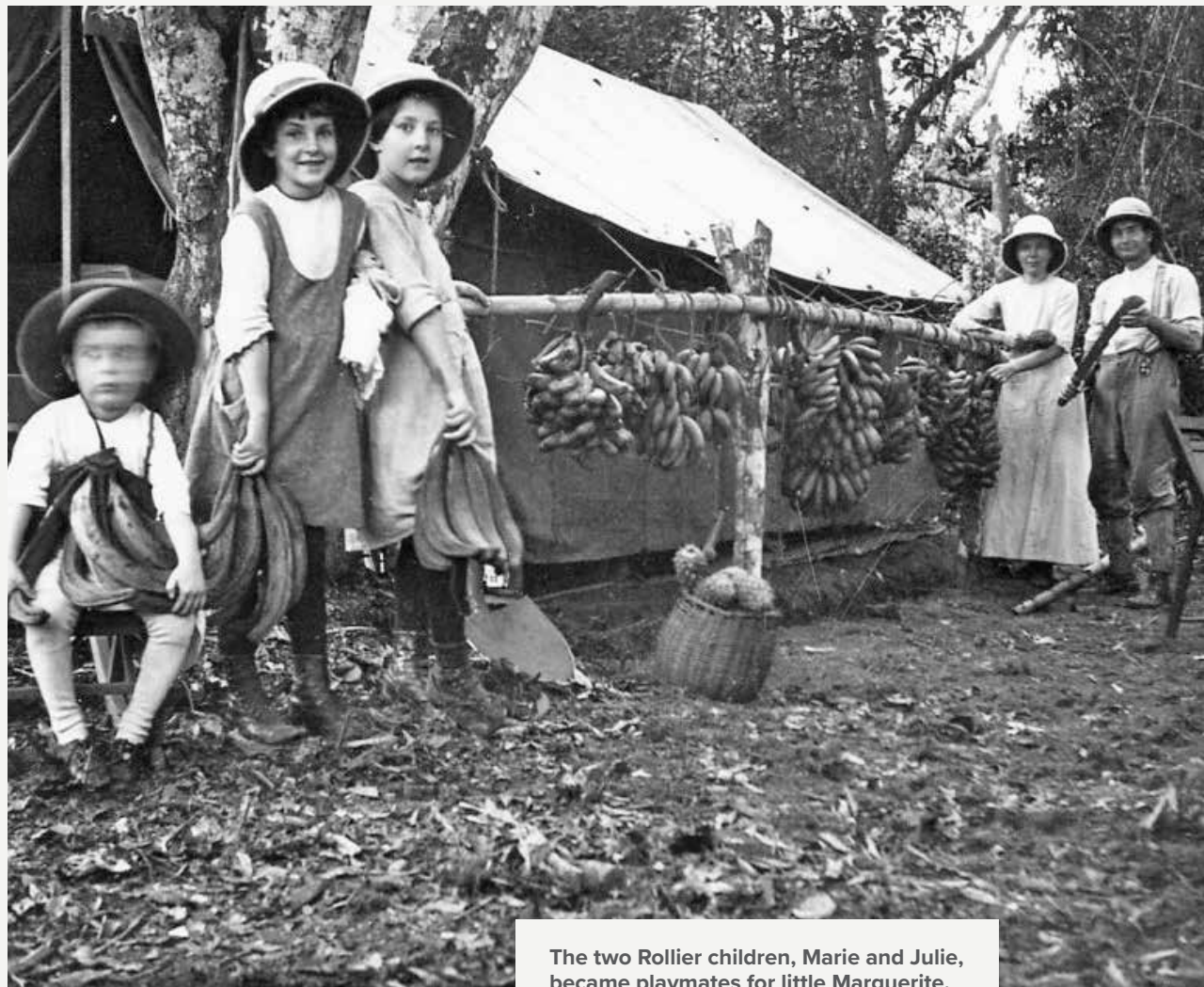
PHYSICAL MAP
OF
AFRICA

English Miles
0 200 400 600 800 1000

Below Sea Level
Sea Level - 1,000 feet
1,000 - 2,000
2,000 - 5,000

The party was not idle, however, for daily they spent much time in Bible study and prayer. They wrote many challenging articles in an effort to mobilize more men and women to pray, give and go. They also studied French and Sango, one of the African languages they would use once in Oubangui-Chari. The waiting days also afforded an opportunity to study mission methods and policies on the field without being actually engaged in putting them into action. One of the convictions of the pioneer at this stage is evinced in his statement: "As soon as we organize our churches in Oubangui-Chari, we trust that they will be self-supporting. We expect to work for self-support for the native evangelists from the time that we have our very first churches."¹³

¹³ Gribble, *Undaunted Hope*, p. 209-210."



The two Rollier children, Marie and Julie, became playmates for little Marguerite.



Undated Photo

This waiting time also afforded opportunity to address individual letters to candidates whom the Lord was raising up in the homeland to go forth. To one candidate James Gribble wrote:

It is with great joy that we learned that you have offered your life to be spent in helping to carry the gospel into one of the greatest and most needy of mission fields, Oubangui-Chari. No greater work has ever been committed unto the children of men than that of carrying the blessed news of a full and complete salvation to the worst of sinners by virtue of the shed blood of the Son of God.

And there is no place in all the world more needy, no place more dark than Oubangui-Chari. It seems as if all earth and hell have united in saying "No" to the carrying of the gospel there. Yet we know that it shall be preached there, for the Great Commission implies it. And we find that the church will be composed of representatives from every tongue, tribe, and nation (Revelation 5:9). So even if the obstacles that confront us tower up to heaven, we know that we will, by the grace of God, overcome them.

The native Christians, those who have been born again, are the joy of the missionary and his crown. But the winning of souls is no easier here than at home. When converts are made in a land like this, one experiences a surprising joy. No living being upon earth can have greater joy than to be used in leading souls to the Lord Jesus from among a people who have never previously known of Him.

But it seems that upon entering these dark fields, one feels the darkness of his surroundings. And unless one sets himself at any cost, and by the grace of God, to have victory in his life, he will fail. Self must absolutely go under. Otherwise one's entire spiritual life is in jeopardy. As never before, we learn upon the mission field what it means to crucify self. It is only by the power of God that one is able to surmount the opposition of the adversary, who continually endeavors to crush us.

Those who best learn to humble themselves under the mighty hand of God are usually lifted the highest by Him. God is absolutely faithful, and it is the faithfulness of a prayer-hearing God that we need to trust. His eye and His hand are upon every child of His, especially those who seek to obey the Great Commission.¹⁴

— JAMES GRIBBLE

¹⁴ Gribble, *Undaunted Hope*, p. 211.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 211

As the wait at Brazzaville drew to a close the pioneer seemed to know that deliverance was at hand. A few months before the party was released he wrote:

How glad we are to feel that our permission is near at hand. This wait has been long and trying, and only God could have given us the needed grace to go through with it. Yet, as he has led us to wait, although it seemed like trusting in the dark, he has proved, and will prove, His faithfulness.¹⁵

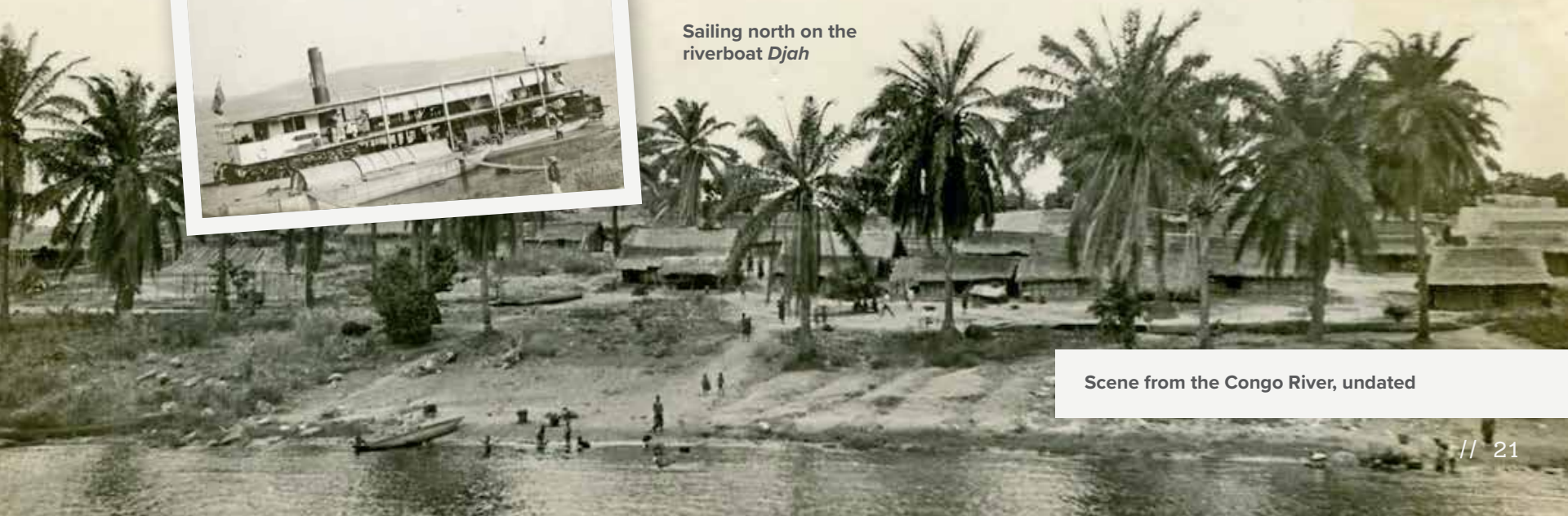
Finally, after a wait of eighteen months the party was permitted to proceed to Carnot (a government post named for a president of the French Republic), just one hundred ten miles from Bozoum, but not at that time in Oubangui-Chari. Carnot could only be reached by river. The route was via the Congo, the Sangha, and the Mambere rivers. This was one of the most unhealthful sections of French Equatorial Africa. Sleeping sickness and malaria fever abounded along the course of these rivers.

However, the party was happy to be moving in the direction of Bozoum and preparation was made to pull stakes. On September 10, 1919, they boarded a small river boat, a wood-burning steamer, with only two cabins of two berths each.

Four of the party slept in the cabins and four on deck. The accommodations were ill foreboding. Six days later Mrs. Rollier succumbed to the ravages of malaria fever and the river steamer stopped at Ikelemba long enough for the party to bury its dead. The Swedish Baptist Mission, which has since evangelized in that area, has a little chapel near this missionary grave which has been appropriately marked with a bronze tablet.



Sailing north on the riverboat *Djah*



Scene from the Congo River, undated

THE PARTY HAD
SUFFERED ITS FIRST
CASUALTY BY DEATH.

There were no words to express the anguish of bereavement under such circumstances. Yet suffering hearts must not only endure, they must live and serve as well. And although every member of the little party was suffering from slight fevers, although their hearts were wrung with anguish, yet they found inexpressibly true the words: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me." ... Mary Rollier had offered up a willing sacrifice, her life, for Africa's evangelization. Her body awaits the resurrection in the first missionary grave in that part of Africa.¹⁶

¹⁶ Gribble, *Undaunted Hope*, p. 216-217.

Whatever may be the duration of our stay here, the Spirit has not given us the liberty to turn aside elsewhere; we must tarry until the door be opened ... We are knocking at the door of one of the greatest unreached mission fields in the entire world. The gospel must, must be preached here ... if we fail to stand true to the Lord, He will be obliged to use others to do this work.

– JAMES GRIBBLE, C. 1919, AFTER ARRIVING IN AFRICA AS A MISSIONARY WITH ENCOMPASS WORLD PARTNERS, DURING THE 36 MONTHS IT REQUIRED TO GAIN PERMISSION TO SET UP A PERMANENT STATION



Mrs. Mary Rollier, first casualty of pioneer work in Oubangui-Chari

Burial of Mary Rollier, born in Sebastianowka, Russia, on December 30, 1880, and died ascending the Sangha River on December 16, 1919



SADLY, THE REMNANT OF FOUR ADVANCED. IT WAS THREE MONTHS LATER WHEN THE LITTLE PARTY ARRIVED AT CARNOT WHERE GREATER SORROWS AWAITED THEM. “DID EVER A PARTY SO WEAK MAKE AN ADVANCE SO DESPERATE AGAINST STRONGHOLDS SO FORMIDABLE?”¹⁷

At Carnot the party was momentarily discouraged in not being able to proceed to Bozoum. They were so near and yet so far. God who gave the vision would not fail, but there was one more siege to pass through. Nineteen hundred twenty was to be the darkest year of all. Word came that Miss Snyder, who had joined a mission in the Belgian Congo and did not accompany the party to Carnot, had gone to be with the Lord after a severe attack of malaria fever. She passed away on August 20, 1920.

¹⁷ Gribble, *Undaunted Hope*, p. 217.



Building healthier housing at Carnot. James with little Marguerite



Temporary housing for the 18-month stay at Carnot

Mr. Rollier, who had borne up well under the bereavement for his wife, soon felt he should take his motherless daughters back to America. Accordingly, he left Carnot in October, never to return to Africa. This was a hard blow for the little party. But the vision had not faded—and the three remaining adults fought on.

**Myrtle Mae Snyder,
December 4, 1882 –
August 20, 1920;
the second casualty
of pioneer work in
Oubangui-Chari**



THE PIONEER WRITES OF THIS PERIOD:

Ever since coming to Carnot, the opposition has not only been intense, but has been waged against us with extreme cunning ... Beyond all doubt this is a dark land, and it is being firmly held in the grasp of the hosts that oppose our Lord. What yet lies ahead of us to suffer and endure, we cannot now even conjecture. But we know that those that are for us are more than those that are against us; therefore, we do not despair.¹⁸

¹⁸ Gribble, *Undaunted Hope*, p. 233.

But Satan was pressing the battle sore.
Mrs. Gribble became seriously ill, nigh
unto death. Of this illness James writes:

I SAW THAT MY WIFE'S SEEMINGLY
IMMINENT DEATH WAS A MASTER
STROKE OF SATAN AGAINST THIS
WORK. THEREFORE, I HELD ON TO THE
LORD IN THE MOST EARNEST PRAYER
IN WHICH I EVER ENGAGED. WHILE I
ACKNOWLEDGED TO THE LORD THAT
HE COULD BY HIS GRACE GET ALONG
WITHOUT ANY OR ALL OF US, AND
THAT SHOULD HE CHOOSE TO TAKE
MY WIFE NOW, I WOULD YET BY HIS
GRACE STAND TRUE TO THE CAUSE TO
WHICH WE HAD LONG BEEN UNITEDLY
CALLED; YET IF IT WERE ONLY A CASE
OF HER BEING BROUGHT BACK TO LIFE
IN ANSWER TO SOMEONE'S EARNEST
PRAYER, I WOULD LIKE TO BE THAT
FAITHFUL INTERCESSOR.¹⁹

¹⁹ Gribble, *Undaunted Hope*, p. 252.

²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 254

Next, the pioneer himself was attacked. He writes:

I AM BREAKING. FIRST MY BODY
WEAKENS, THEN MY NERVES ... I
ASK FOR AN INCREASED AMOUNT OF
PRAYER. BUT I BELIEVE THAT WE ARE
JUST ON THE EVE OF VICTORY, AND
THE IMPULSE OF PERMISSION MAY BE
SO GREAT AS TO MAKE A NEW MAN
OF ME ... HOW GREAT IS MAN'S WORK
IN THIS WILD COUNTRY WHERE ALL
IS WILDERNESS ... ESPECIALLY IF
THAT MAN BE ALONE.²⁰



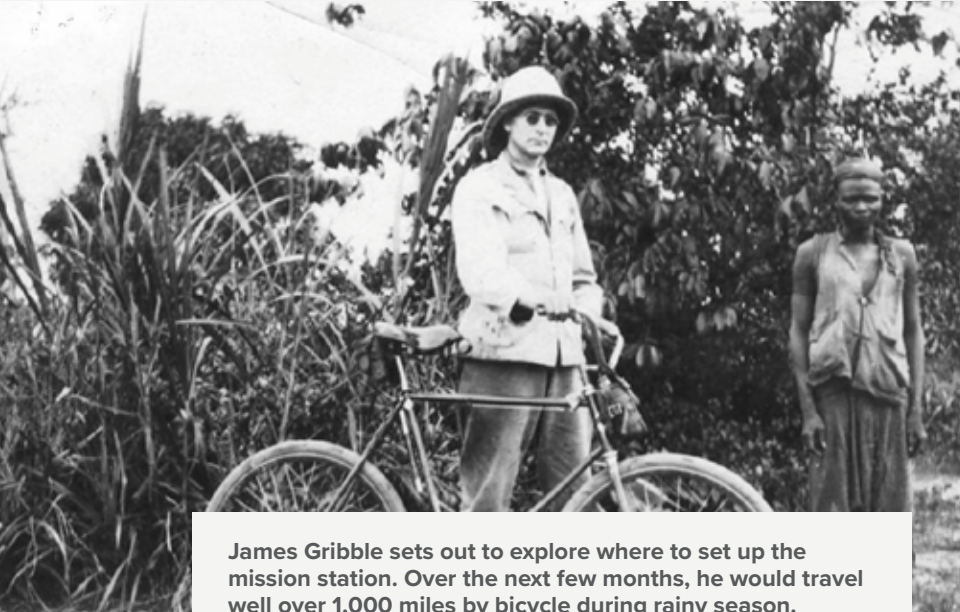
The pioneer was right about being on the eye of victory. Satan had done his best. Now God came to their relief. As G. Campbell Morgan relates in another connection: “God never comes a day too soon. He never comes a day too late. The interventions of God in human history always take place at the right hour; whether they are brought about through souls loyal, or by others whom He girds, even though they have not known Him, as in the case of Cyrus.”

It is difficult for us to understand, in view of the international conventions granting liberty to Protestant missions to install stations in the Congo Basin, how this little pioneer party could be forbidden permission to establish a religious and medical work in Oubangui-Chari. The terms of the Treaties of Berlin, 1885, and Brussels, 1890, both of which were incorporated in the Treaty of St. Germain-en-Laye in 1919, and to which France and the United States are Signatories, are binding upon the states occupying the territories of the Congo not only to permit, but actually to protect and favor, all religious and charitable organizations seeking the welfare of the African natives.²¹

Making contacts during his exploratory trip

²¹ The Convention of St. Germain-en-Laye, Sept. 10, 1919, Art. 15.

For whatever reason the party was delayed, it is quite certain that the continuing presence of the pioneer party first at Brazzaville and then at Carnot, pressing its claims at the throne of grace, was used of God to convince the authorities of the sincerity and self-sacrificing attitudes of Protestant missionaries. It was this, more than anything else, that brought permission to evangelize and locate missions in French Equatorial Africa at the turn of the year 1921.



James Gribble sets out to explore where to set up the mission station. Over the next few months, he would travel well over 1,000 miles by bicycle during rainy season.

Two months later the general inspector of administrative affairs arrived at Carnot to advise the Gribbles that permission was granted for them to proceed to Bozoum, as they might desire, to establish their mission. That was February 2, 1921. The siege was over, and the door swung wide open. God's hour had struck.

Immediately the following telegram was dispatched to the church in the homeland: "Permission granted. Hallelujah. Locating further inland."

The victory made a new man out of Pioneer Gribble. Although he had been in Africa for three years, God renewed his strength. And now he proceeded to scout out an ideal location for the first station. He left the little party at Carnot, consisting of his wife and daughter and Miss Myers, and rode northward on his bicycle to Bozoum, a distance of one hundred and ten miles.



Scenes from the African countryside.

When he finally looked upon Bozoum and the surrounding country, he thanked God and took courage. Ten years had elapsed since the vision, ten years during which he had been led through a long and circuitous route. Every step was marked and dated. His Guide had known the end from the beginning thereof and was bringing him at last to the desired haven; “for the purposes of Jehovah ... do stand” (Jeremiah 51:29).²²

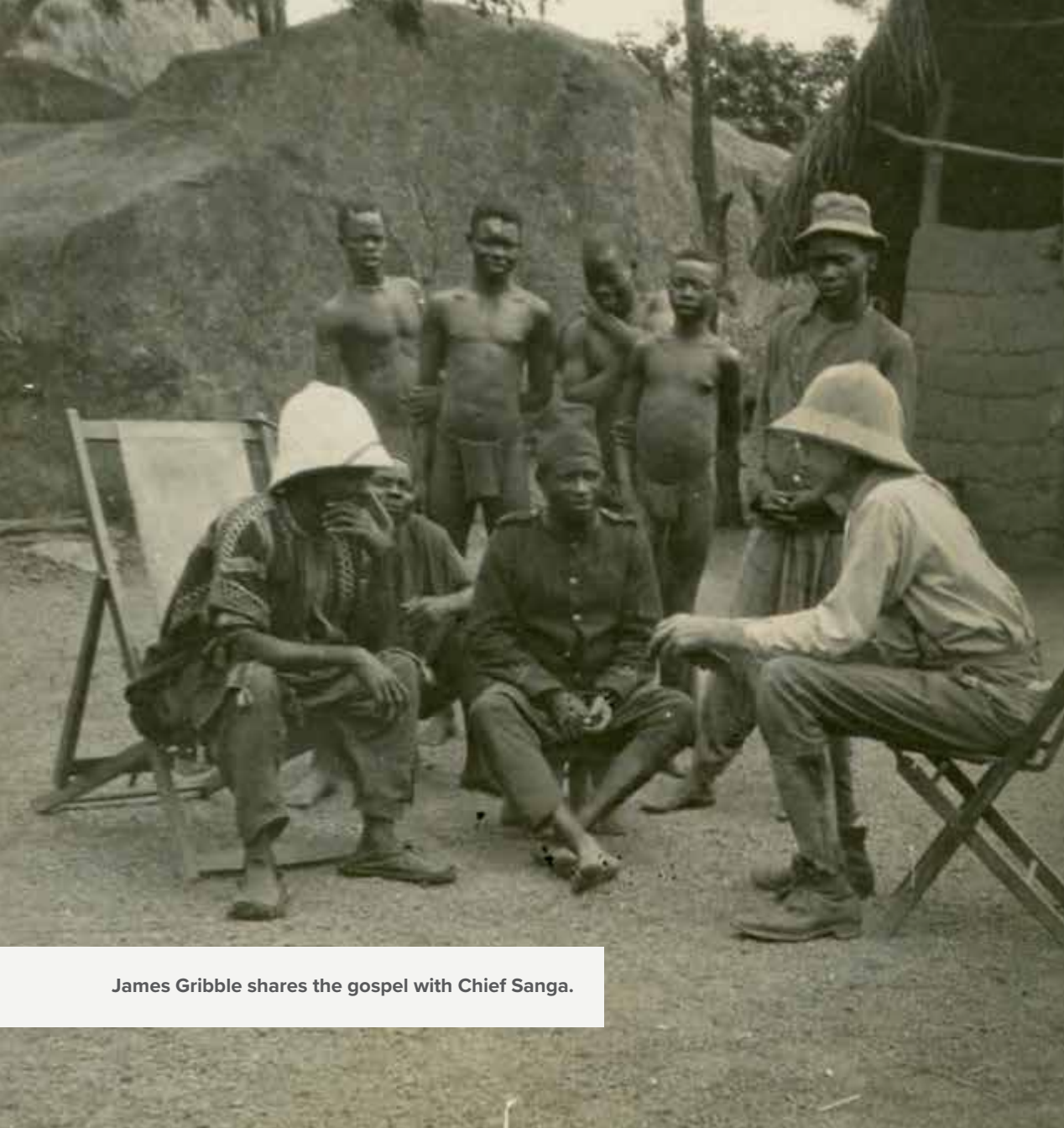
ALONE HE HAD SEEN THE VISION;
ALONE HE EMBRACED ITS REALIZATION.

During a whole decade this man of God’s choosing had pushed steadily and relentlessly forward, through all sorts of difficulties and discouragements—enough to crush the ordinary man—until God’s calling had been realized. The secret of his dauntless courage is found in a verse from the Psalms: “I have set the Lord always before me: because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved” (Psalm 16:8).

²² Gribble, *Undaunted Hope*, p. 260.

It was during this first scouting trip to Bassai that James had an unforgettable encounter with a local tribal chief. He wrote:

After telling Chief Sanga the story of Jesus and how He died for our sins, I paused. He said, ‘Tell me the story again.’ I did so. When ready to leave, the chief asked to know more of the Gospel... I then asked the Chief what he particularly desired to know. He said to me, ‘You tell me about being saved by Jesus, that He died for our sins, and that by believing on Him we can be saved and go to the place that He has prepared for us in heaven. What about the Baya who have died without ever having heard the Gospel Story?’ Never was a question put more pointed or more forcefully. You know the force of such a question. Because of it, may there be an exodus of missionaries from America to Africa...



WHAT WAS I TO SAY? THERE HE SAT, STARING ME IN THE FACE AND COMMANDING AN ANSWER. WHOM WAS I TO INDICT? SURELY NOT GOD, FOR HE GAVE HIS SON THAT THE BAYA MIGHT BE SAVED. OF COURSE, I COULD NOT SAY THAT HIS ANCESTORS WOULD BE EXCUSED BECAUSE OF IGNORANCE I TOLD HIM THAT GOD IS A GOD OF LOVE AND IS FAITHFUL. I VERY FORCEFULLY TOLD HIM THAT NOW AFTER ONCE HEARING WE WILL CERTAINLY BE PUNISHED IF WE REJECT JESUS ... AS I BADE HIM FAREWELL, CHIEF SANGA'S EYES WERE FILLED WITH TEARS AND HE COULD NOT SPEAK FOR EMOTION.

James Gribble shares the gospel with Chief Sanga.

The site for the first station was chosen at Bassai in the Karre mountains twenty-five miles north of Bozoum in the heart of the Karre tribe. The Karre welcomed the pioneer with open arms.²³ Now James could preach the gospel everywhere he went with entire liberty.



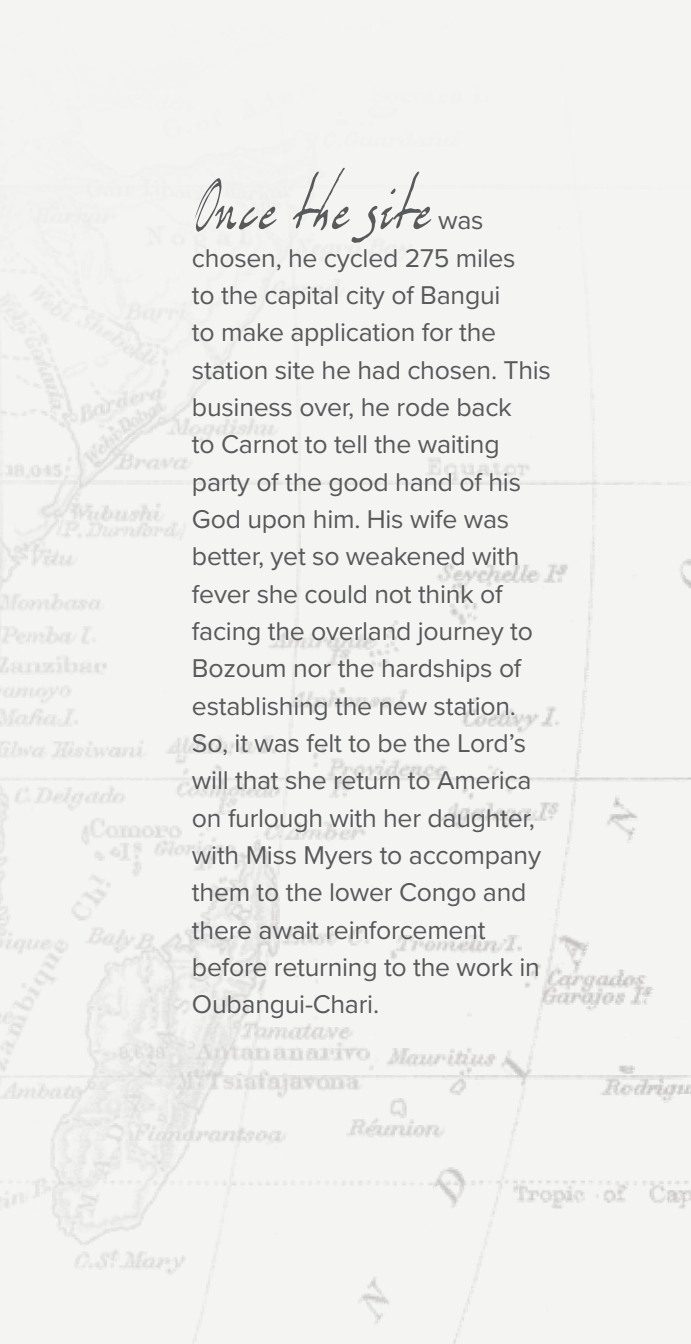
Local warriors meet James Gribble

²³ "Une Breve Etude sur la Race Karre," par O. D. Jobson, le 27, about, 1949. (This study of the Karre tribe gives interesting information on these people among whom Pioneer Gribble located the first station.)

²⁴ Gribble, *Undaunted Hope*, p. 272.

AT THE CLOSE OF THAT MOMENTOUS WEEK HE WROTE:

During the past week (the hand of the Lord) has certainly been marvelously with me, for which I am sincerely thankful. This is doubtless in answer to prayer, as I am unworthy of God's bountiful blessings. I certainly believe that Bassai is the very place to which God would have us go now. There are so many people within access even now. They will be within very easy access when the roads are once built.²⁴



Once the site was chosen, he cycled 275 miles to the capital city of Bangui to make application for the station site he had chosen. This business over, he rode back to Carnot to tell the waiting party of the good hand of his God upon him. His wife was better, yet so weakened with fever she could not think of facing the overland journey to Bozoum nor the hardships of establishing the new station. So, it was felt to be the Lord's will that she return to America on furlough with her daughter, with Miss Myers to accompany them to the lower Congo and there await reinforcement before returning to the work in Oubangui-Chari.



Little Marguerite. James would soon say good-bye, never to see her again on this earth.

THIS UNFORESEEN SEPARATION WAS VERY HARD ON THE PIONEER. FROM NOW ON HE WOULD BE ALONE, BUT AS IN THE CASE OF THE APOSTLE PAUL, THE LORD STOOD WITH HIM. HE PACKED THE REMAINING EQUIPMENT AND PROVISIONS INTO LOADS OF FIFTY-FIVE POUNDS EACH FOR NATIVE PORTERS, AND, MOUNTING HIS BICYCLE, LED HIS CARAVAN WITH JOY TO BOZOUUM AND BASSAI—THE LAND HE HAD SEEN IN THE VISION.



Using native porters

On his first trip to Bozoum the pioneer had given a contract to the native chief to build two circular houses of mud and grass on the Bozoum hill for his future use. These were completed when he arrived, and after settling with the chief for his work, the pioneer occupied one house and stored his equipment in the other. The rainy season was now well advanced and very little could be done to get the station site at Bassai ready for building. So, in the meantime, he went again to Bangui to make final arrangements concerning the station site at Bassai. Upon the return trip the pioneer took the road north to Bossangoa and then back west to Bozoum. With the completion of this trip the pioneer had traveled for the most part, through the height of the rainy season with bike and caravan, the almost incredible distance of some 1,500 miles.



Setting up camp on Bassai Hill

Over the routes he traveled the Mission has since located seven of its mission stations and the native Christians have built scores of chapels.

Back at Bozoum after an absence of two and one-half months, James Gribble prepared to move to Bassai. He left Bozoum on November 3, and after clearing the station site, he pitched his tent there on November 9.

The first building on Bassai Hill served as temporary home and storage shed for James Gribble.



During the days that the pioneers waited in faith, God was calling other servants to join the work as soon as permission would be granted. Miss Charlotte Hillegas, who later became Mrs. Jobson, and I (Orville Jobson) were actually on our way to Africa before Brother Gribble got installed at Bassai. After a brief stay in France, we sailed for Africa in October. At Bangui we met Miss Myers, who was waiting for us, and our party of three traveled overland the two hundred and fifty miles to Bozoum in about fifteen days. Here we met the pioneer and together we traveled the remaining distance to Bassai, arriving there on the last day of that memorable year, 1921.



Early photo of Charlotte Hillegas, who would marry Orville Jobson

Somewhat later photo of Orville Jobson



When the sun rose bright and warm over the valley that stretches eastward from the Bassai Hill on New Year's morning, 1922, the Mission entered a new phase of its history. The founder's vision had been realized, the first station was open and reinforcements had arrived. But again, the pioneer was peering out into the future.

“LET ANY MAN IN THE MINISTRY FEEL THAT THERE IS SOMETHING LACKING,” SAYS DR. G. CAMPBELL MORGAN, “UNLESS IN THE HOUR OF LONELY COMMUNION WITH GOD THERE FLAMES BEFORE HIM SUCH VISIONS, THAT HE NEVER CAN TELL, BUT WHICH ABIDING WITH HIM, CREATE THE NOTE OF HIS CONFIDENCE AND AUTHORITY, AND INSPIRE HIS DETERMINATION TO PROSECUTE THE WORK OF HIS MINISTRY TO THE END.”

Such visions, preeminently true of pioneers, James Gribble had, and spoke of them only because he seemed to understand that soon he would be called from the scenes of their realization, and leave inexperienced followers in his train.



Undated photo

The mission station
on Bassai Hill



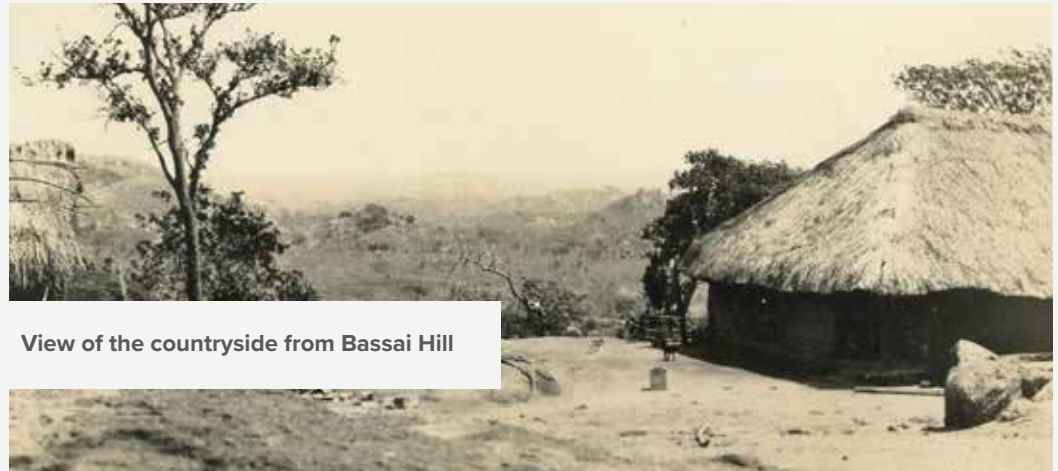
Well do I [Orville Jobson] remember those early months in 1922, when I spent long hours into the night listening to this “chosen vessel” speaking of the Laka to the north, which included the Kabba in his thinking, still untouched with the gospel; of the tribes to the east where the Mission would meet the work and workers of his East Africa fellow-missionary, Mr. Haas, who also had waited part of the time with the pioneer party in Brazzaville. Then he felt a particular responsibility for the Banou to the east, through which he had passed on several occasions, and considered Bozoum a logical step in the advance toward them. Nor did he ever forget the Baya to the south and west, through which the pioneer party had passed in the waiting days at Carnot. Chief Sanga’s question lingered still in his heart: “What about the Baya who have died without ever hearing the gospel story?” And finally: “If others do not open a station at Bangui, as our work expands we shall doubtless deem it advisable to do so.”²⁵ Such was his vision, a great field of labor, thousands of souls in heathen darkness, and a wide-open door to reach them for Christ.

²⁵ Gribble, *Undaunted Hope*, p. 189-190.

The mother station remained the only station for over two years. We experienced hardships and vicissitudes which threw us on our knees as never before. We began to realize that the vision which had just been held out before us was to be possessed in the hard way. Everything was urgent. Buildings were essential to our health, language study was imperative as a means of communicating with the people, medical assistance to the suffering was a constant activity, while preaching the gospel was the supreme task for which we had come forth. All of this came simultaneously as we were getting acclimated in the tropics and acquainted with a strange people. Even food was scarce. Of these days the founder wrote: “Recently I have not been well, and I have been conscious that I could not last long, my condition being aggravated by the Bassai food conditions.”²⁶ It was a

time of spiritual struggle, disappointments, misunderstandings, and occasionally of spiritual defeat. Satanic opposition was strong, but God never permitted a lasting victory to his evil designs. “Thanks be unto God who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 15:57). The founder voiced the feeling of us all when he

wrote: “Pioneering is not easy, but when it is for the sake of the gospel and the hastening of His coming, oh, what a privilege!” Some of this was true in a certain measure of some of the subsequent stations, but it was pre-eminently true of that first station, without a base within hundreds of miles, and under direct attack from Satan and his angels.



View of the countryside from Bassai Hill

²⁶ Gribble, *Undaunted Hope*, p. 347.

“PIONEERING IS NOT EASY, BUT WHEN IT IS FOR THE SAKE OF THE GOSPEL AND THE HASTENING OF HIS COMING, OH, WHAT A PRIVILEGE!”



First baptisms of five men from the Karre tribe

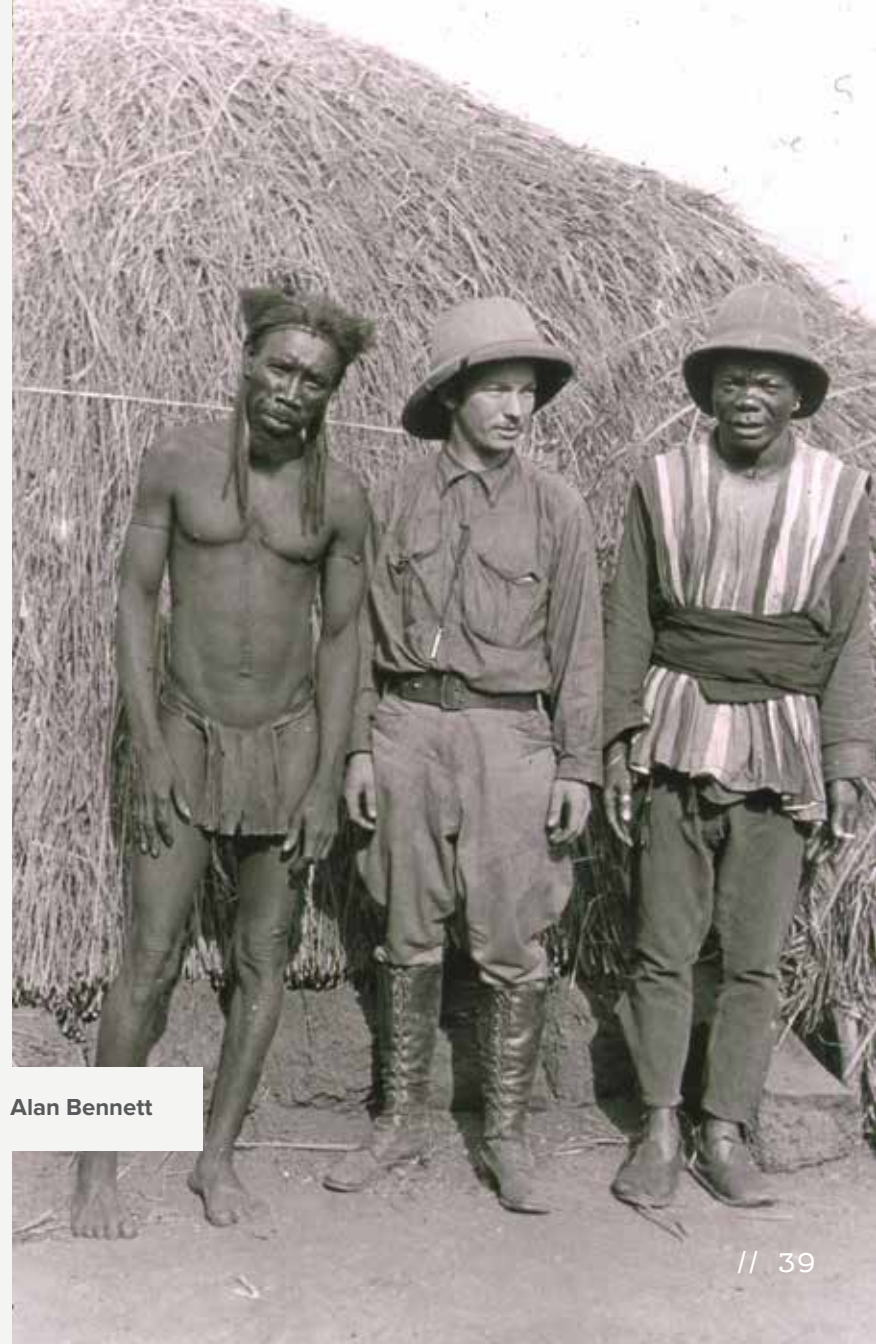
But there were victories too.

The preaching of the gospel was honored of the Lord and the Holy Spirit convicted of sin. The first baptismal service took place on May 28, 1922, when five Karre men testified of their faith in Christ. Some of these have since passed over to the other side, but at the present time, as far as we know, the first of these five is still rejoicing in his salvation and living a happy Christian life. This was the first fruit of thousands who have found salvation in Christ. Two who came to know the Lord during this period have been ordained to the gospel ministry and are fruitfully serving their Lord in the African church. By the end of April 1923, the little church numbered some thirty members.

Meanwhile, Dr. Gribble had arrived in America (October 26, 1921), and after a brief rest began deputation work presenting to the churches the need for missionaries to hasten to the new field that God had opened. Hearts were touched and many volunteered. Six new recruits were approved by the board to sail for Africa during 1922 and early 1923.

During her furlough Dr. Gribble had to face the decision of where she should leave her daughter Marguerite before she could return to Africa. Many missionaries have had the same decision to make—some in the pioneer years when the children were small, and some after they have grown beyond the age when it is considered wise for them to remain in Africa. It is always a problem, and those of us who have experienced the strain, unitedly agree that this is problem number one for missionary parents.

IN APRIL 1922, THE FIRST OF THE NEW RECRUITS SET SAIL FOR FRANCE—ALLEN LEE BENNETT. THERE HE ENGAGED IN LANGUAGE STUDY UNTIL DR. GRIBBLE ARRIVED FROM AMERICA AND THEN THEY PROCEEDED TO AFRICA TOGETHER.



Alan Bennett

*God is not going to look us over for medals,
degrees or diplomas, but for scars.*

– JAMES GRIBBLE,
UPON THE DEATH OF MISSIONARY
RECRUIT ALAN BENNETT



Alan Bennett, April 10, 1899 - January 17, 1923.
The third casualty of pioneer work in Oubangui-Chari,
he died of Spanish Influenza.

The pioneer joyfully journeyed the 275 miles again to Bangui to meet his wife and the young soldier accompanying her. On the return journey another sorrow befell them. Young Bennett became ill at Gazele, a village still one hundred miles from the Bassai station, and after nine days of intense suffering from influenza was “loosed away” upward to be with the Lord on January 17, 1923. His last conscious words were, “There is nothing between my Lord and me.” There in front of the little mud hut in which he died, Africans lovingly laid the body to rest. A bronze marker has been erected including the words of the Apostle Paul to Timothy, “Remember Jesus Christ.”

It was hard for us to understand why God would permit such a talented young man, so sorely needed in the early stages of the work, to be taken from us. We could see no bright sequel, on the earthly level, to what appeared to us as an untimely death. But God doeth all things well. Bennett was a faithful witness of the Lord Jesus to the Africans who loved him dearly. Doubtless many of them shall be his “crown of rejoicing” in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ. But twenty-five years later we saw, what appears to us, the crowning fruit of this “grain of wheat” which fell into the earth and died.



Upon the return to Bassai

with his wife, the pioneer too, was nearing the end of his course. The interval was filled with hardships, discouragements and dangers for the “breaking pioneer.” His life was being offered to God as a daily sacrifice. It seemed to us that he was greatly needed for the realization of the vision which God had given him. But God makes no mistakes. “He buries his workers, but carries on His work.” The “upward call” came on June 4, 1923, barely twenty months from the day he first pitched his tent on the Bassai hill.

James had never thought of staying at Bassai; he was always restless to move on to those unreached tribes, which to his eyes of faith held many trophies for his Lord. Others would remain at Bassai, but he and his wife would move on to the tribes and fields unoccupied. But God had other plans, higher plans for His faithful pioneer, and this time when he pulled stakes, it was for glory, to look into the face of His Lord, whose precious name was the last word on his lips, “Come, Lord Jesus.” Who would say that the undaunted pioneer, who saw so little actual fruit from his pioneer labors, would be denied the desire he expressed just a few months before his death in these words: “I shall be content with the lowest seat in heaven if only there I may sit and see the redeemed of the Lord come in from those fields where I have been a pioneer missionary.” They have been going through those portals of glory now for over thirty years.

Pioneer Gribble had been in tropical Africa under the most trying circumstances for five and one-half years. Reason dictates that he should have returned home on furlough once permission was granted. But he saw the great need of establishing an effective testimony for the Lord in dark Africa and thought not of himself. He turned from the prospect of a comfortable and restful furlough in America to stretch his hand out for an enduring crown in heaven. He remained in the land of which God had given him the vision, to finish his work and—to die.



James Gribble

*Glory! Glory! How the angels sing,
Glory! Glory! How the loud harps ring.
'Tis the ransomed army, like a mighty sea,
Pealing forth the anthem of the free.²⁷*

²⁷ W. O. Cushing, "Ring the Bells of Heaven."

The outstanding appreciation of Pioneer Gribble was written by Dr. McClain who was closely associated with the beginnings of the Africa work. It is too long to quote it all here but let me share with you the closing phrases.



**James Gribble, February 25, 1883 –
June 4, 1923, fourth casualty of
pioneer work in central Africa**

AT FIRST THOUGHT IT WOULD SEEM HARD TO UNDERSTAND WHY SUCH A MISSIONARY LIFE SHOULD BE CUT SHORT WITH BUT A FEW SHORT YEARS OF SERVICE. WE SHALL UNDERSTAND SOME DAY. IN THE MEANTIME, LET US NOT FORGET THAT GOD RECKONS NOT ACCORDING TO TIME BUT ACCORDING TO ACCOMPLISHMENT. IN THE FEW YEARS OF HIS MISSIONARY SERVICE, JAMES GRIBBLE ACCOMPLISHED MORE THAN MANY ACCOMPLISH IN A LONG LIFETIME. IT IS NOT TOO MUCH TO SAY THAT PERHAPS CHIEFLY THROUGH THE FAITH AND LABOR OF THIS “SERVANT OF THE LORD” FRENCH EQUATORIAL AFRICA HAS BEEN THROWN OPEN TO THE PREACHING OF THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST. THIS IS HIS MONUMENT, OF WHICH HE NEED NOT BE ASHAMED IN THAT DAY.



Their daughter, Marguerite, would marry a young man who shared her parents' passion to evangelize Africa. Harold and Marguerite Dunning arrived on the field in 1940 and served with distinction until retirement in 1971.



Florence remained in Africa after her husband's death, dedicating herself to medical evangelism



Florence Gribble, December 3, 1879 – March 31, 1942, sixth casualty of ministry in central Africa



Florence Gribble's gravesite

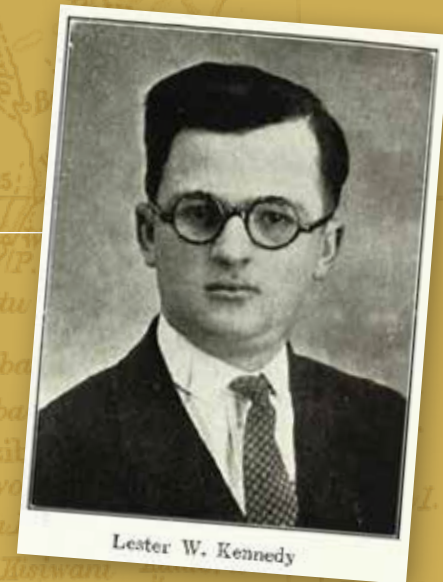
A great missionary has gone home. The honor we have paid him is not wrongly bestowed. The Bible commands us to “hold such in honor, because for the work of Christ he was nigh unto death, not regarding his own life.” Yet I am sure that if he were with us now, he would take the crown of “honor” from his head and lay it at the feet of the Lord he loved to magnify. Therefore, let us give glory not to Gribble but rather to this Lord of Gribble, who made him the missionary that he was.

It is for us “the living” to dedicate ourselves to the task for which he died.²⁸

EDITOR’S NOTE:

From 1918-1931, a total of twenty-six missionaries formed the first wave of pioneers to enter the heart of Africa with the Foreign Missionary Society of the Brethren Church (now Encompass World Partners). Five died within that period, and another was evacuated for health reasons, never to return.

Lester Kennedy,
November 3, 1898 –
November 5, 1931,
fifth casualty of pioneer
work in Oubangui-Chari



Lester W. Kennedy

²⁸ Alva J. McClain, “James S. Gribble, Pioneer Missionary,” *The Brethren Missionary*, 7, 685-686.

Estella Myers, one of the original four who set sail in 1918, remained a faithful missionary until her death on November 1, 1956.



Miss Myers is buried alongside James and Florence on Bassai Hill.

ESTELLA C. MYERS
1884 - 1956
SERVITOR FIDELI
1 COR 15: 58



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