

E. J.  
**WAGGONER**

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From the Physician of Good News to  
the Agent of Division

WOODROW WHIDDEN



REVIEW AND HERALD® PUBLISHING ASSOCIATION  
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Published by Review and Herald® Publishing Association, Hagerstown, MD 21741-1119

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This book was  
Edited by Gerald Wheeler  
Copyedited by James Cavil  
Designed by Trent Truman  
Typeset: 11/14 Berkeley Book

PRINTED IN U.S.A.

12 11 10 09 08

5 4 3 2 1

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Whidden, Woodrow W. (Woodrow Wilson), 1944- .

E.J. Waggoner : from the physician of good news to agent of division / Woodrow Whidden.  
p. cm.

“Published books of Ellet Joseph Waggoner”—P.

1. Waggoner, E. J. (Ellet Joseph) 2. Seventh-day Adventists—United States—Biography.

I. Title.

BX6193.W25W45 2008

286.7092—dc22

[B]

2007049812

ISBN 978-0-8280-1982-8

# DEDICATION

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To

**JEAN DAVIS**

an Adventist family historian from Battle Creek, Michigan, and

**MARK PETERS**

a great-great-grandson of E. J. Waggoner.

Without Jean's indefatigable sleuthing  
in all sorts of nook and crannies  
of the Waggoner family history,  
this biography would have been greatly diminished.

Mark, an enthusiastic Waggoner family archivist,  
has provided many photos  
and a wealth of detail  
in response to countless e-mail requests.

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## CHAPTER I

### SERVANT OF THE VISION, CHILD OF THE MIDWEST, AND SON OF THE PIONEERS: 1855–1874

#### THE VISION

THE TURNING POINT of the Christian experience of the young adult Ellet J. Waggoner came on a “dismal, rainy afternoon” during a camp meeting held at Healdsburg, California, in October of 1882. While sitting on the edge of the main tent listening to a “servant of God” making a presentation on the grace of God, Waggoner suddenly found himself overtaken by a profoundly moving vision of the crucified Christ. His recollection breathes the rapture of vivid revelation and discovery:

“Suddenly a light shone about me, and the tent seemed illuminated, as though the sun were shining. I saw Christ crucified for me, and to me was revealed for the first time in my life the fact that God loved *me*, and that Christ gave Himself for me personally. It was all for me. If I could describe my feelings, they would not be understood by those who have not had a similar experience, and to such no explanation is necessary. . . .

“I knew that this light that came to me was a revelation direct from heaven; therefore I knew that in the Bible I should find the message of God’s love for individual sinners, and I resolved that the rest of my life should be devoted to finding it there, and making it plain to others. The light that shone upon me that day from the cross of Christ has been my guide in all my Bible study; wherever I have turned in the Sacred Book, I have found Christ set forth as the power of God, to the salvation of individuals, and I have never found anything else.”<sup>1</sup>

In the experience of many of God’s prominent messengers throughout the history of the Christian church, there has come a defining

spiritual breakthrough.

For the apostle Paul it was the “Damascus road” bolt of lightning.

For Augustine of Hippo it came in a garden in Milan during a profound moment of despair over his sinful life. Suddenly he heard the voice of a child from a neighboring house saying, “Take up and read.” He immediately turned to a copy of the epistles of Paul that he had been reading and soon found his attention drawn to the words of Paul: “Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying. But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof” (Rom. 13:13, 14). The incident would bring peace of mind and a deep conviction that he could overcome his sins which had hitherto so wretchedly bound him.<sup>2</sup>

For Martin Luther it was his alleged *turmerlebnis* (or “tower experience”) that led to his key theological breakthrough on the primacy of justifying grace in the magisterial Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century.<sup>3</sup>

For John Wesley it was his famous “Aldersgate experience,” in which he felt his “heart strangely warmed” and that he did “trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation, and an assurance was given” to him that Christ “had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death.”<sup>4</sup> After it he would go on to lead the great Methodist revival of the eighteenth century.

For E. J. Waggoner, his defining moment would point the way to his path-breaking contributions to the great righteousness by faith revival of late-nineteenth-century Adventism.

Waggoner would spend most of the next 20-plus years of his life making the message of God’s love for “individual sinners” “plain to others.” But if his life, message, and ministry are to be “plain” to us, we must drop back a few years and review his immediate family background, childhood, early education, and teen years.

### SON OF THE MIDWEST<sup>5</sup>

Ellet Joseph Waggoner was the sixth of 10 children<sup>6</sup> born to Joseph H. Waggoner (1820-1889) and his wife, Maryetta Hall Waggoner (1823-1908). He entered the world on January 12, 1855, in Waukau, Winnebago County, Wisconsin.<sup>7</sup>

Ellet’s father, Joseph H. Waggoner, was one of the more prominent

and versatile figures of early Seventh-day Adventism. At various times he served the church as a writer/theologian, evangelist, editor, revivalist, periodical founder, health and dress reformer,<sup>8</sup> administrator, General Conference committee member, participant in the development of formal Seventh-day Adventist church organization, defender of religious liberty, and overseas missionary.<sup>9</sup>

Both of Ellet's parents were born in the northeastern sector of the United States<sup>10</sup> and as young adults subsequently migrated to the Midwest. Where and how they met is unknown, but their friendship led to marriage on April 30, 1845, in Portland, Whiteside County, Illinois. Soon after the marriage they went to Wisconsin, where Joseph found an opportunity to work in the publishing business.

During the following decade (1845-1855) the young family made numerous moves to various locations in Wisconsin. The best evidence we have for the time and location of these varied places appears in the birth records of the first six children: during the nine-year period from 1846 to 1855 the six births took place in five different towns (or villages): Prairie du Sac, Baraboo, Kingston, Packwaukee, and Waukau.<sup>11</sup>

While the record is a bit sketchy, it is a fair assumption that before his conversion to early Sabbatarian Adventism, Joseph's major occupation was editing political publications. His conversion to Adventism transpired in 1852 "after a period of independent study."<sup>12</sup> The account he wrote of it exhibits a bit of dramatic flair:

"I was a member of the Baptist Church when I first heard the third angel's message. I was a publisher and editor of a political paper. Although I knew I would have to go out of business and lose my standing in the Baptist Church, I decided to obey my conscience and accept the third angel's message. I also accepted the temperance message. Resolving 'that the Lord at His coming should not find me a slave to such a filthy habit, I threw my tobacco into the stove.'<sup>13</sup>

Joseph lost little time in beginning to share his faith through public evangelism and writing for the church paper. Soon church leaders (especially James and Ellen White) recognized his abilities as an evangelist and writer and ordained him to gospel ministry (quite possibly sometime during his first year of church membership).

It was most likely because of Joseph's growing prominence in the



rapidly forming Sabbatarian Adventist movement that the Waggoner family relocated from Wisconsin to eastern Michigan. Sometime during the late fall or early winter of 1855<sup>14</sup> the family settled into a humble home in the little town of Saline, Washtenaw County, Michigan. They stayed in Saline for approximately two years.

The three years from 1855 to 1858 were not easy ones, since they involved the tragic loss of two young children. Two-and-one-half-year-old son Ellis died in October of 1855, and the nearly 2-year-old daughter Ella passed away September 1, 1858. This woeful pattern would extend to September 11, 1864, when 4-year-old Ellsworth F. met an untimely death.

By the time Ellet was 10 he had already experienced the loss of two younger siblings. While such mortality rates were quite common in the nineteenth century, the commonality of it most likely would not have mitigated the effects on the sensitive Ellet. Thus by the year 1884 (with the death of the 36-year-old Christiana Waggoner Guyer), four of the original 10 siblings had perished, and the oldest brother, David, seems to have mysteriously vanished from his place in the family portrait.<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, disease was an ever-present threat. A telling item concerning Joseph Waggoner's family appeared in the *Review and Herald* of November 1, 1864. It began by recalling the recent passing of the 4-year-old Ellsworth. The report then noted the disturbing news that "since then, four others of his children have been attacked with the prevailing fever of the season, and brought very low." We see the wretchedness of the situation further compounded with the revelation that though "some . . . had passed the crisis . . . [their] state . . . unremitting care and attention," compounded by "a scarcity of help," had so burdened the father with "watching" the "sick day and night" that he was "fast being reduced to utter prostration and disease himself."

Grinding poverty further worsened the lot of the family during this period of illness and loss (with its attendant grief). J. N. Loughborough gave the following description of the Waggoner family's living circumstances during the Saline years:

"Elder Waggoner had the use of a house and his wood free, the society there supplying most of the necessary provisions for the family. But he received very little money to expend for needed articles of clothing. . . . Elder Waggoner's boots were badly worn and his clothing threadbare."<sup>16</sup>

Most certainly they fed and clothed the young child, Ellet, but there wasn't much margin for financial and nutritional error in such circumstances.

The fortunes of the family, however, took an upswing with the move to Burlington, Calhoun County, Michigan, during the spring or summer of 1858. James White reported in *Review and Herald* of September 3, 1858, that the "brethren" had asked Joseph to visit "the Western field" (Iowa). White also reported that as Waggoner left for his tour through Iowa he was "worn down by incessant labors day and night, and entered upon his labors sick for want of rest and sleep. He remained feeble all summer. . . . He has preached too much, and in addition to this, had much of the labor and care of the Tent upon him, having no tentmaster."

On a more positive note, "friends of Brother Waggoner" pledged \$125 for his new home in Burlington, which allowed Joseph to pay off the asking price.<sup>17</sup> Thus by 1858 the living circumstances of Joseph and his brood had grown much brighter.

They had a debt-free home, and Joseph drew a regular salary from the newly formed Michigan Conference, serving as the pastor of the Burlington church. The new Burlington home (still occupied as of 2007) was to be the Joseph Waggoner family base for much of the next 40 years.

### THE CASE OF MARY(ETTA) WAGGONER

Certainly these were years of mixed blessings for the boy Ellet and his family because of family strife, most of it revolving around the somewhat dramatic and narcissistic personality of the mother.

Indications of the family challenges surface in a published confession by Mary(etta) that appeared in the *Review and Herald* of May 14, 1861. As this revealing communication will form an important backdrop to subsequent developments in the life of E. J. Waggoner (and his family), I cite it here in full:

"Dear Brethren: Although unworthy, permit me to address you. It is well known that I have been a thorn in my husband's flesh, and a reproach to the Lord's cause for years. I am now heartily sick of my past course. I am ashamed of the way I have treated those who wanted to be my friends. I have resolved to amend in the future.

"I have rejected counsel and grieved the Holy Spirit till God has taken

it from me. I am now in the dark, and know not how to come to the light. I have not strength to return to the Lord. I want help. I regret that I have rejected the testimony given to me through vision. At times I have doubted, at other times disbelieved, and at other times *despised* the visions. Now I want to get in the place where I can thankfully receive reproof, whether it comes through vision, or any other way. Will you who have an interest at the throne of grace help me by your prayers and reproofs, that I may get in the place where God can bless me? I want to love God with all my heart, and serve him from a principle of love. I am now willing that my husband should labor in the message when and where duty calls. I have resolved to try to hold up his hands. Pray for me.

Yours praying for mercy.

*Burlington, Mich.*

Mary H. Waggoner”<sup>18</sup>

Two issues stand out in her cry for help:

First of all, it is quite possible that much of what caused Mary(etta) to be such a “thorn” in her “husband’s flesh” resulted from his numerous and lengthy absences from home. Such grueling travels not only occasioned separation from spouse and family, but were very draining on Joseph. Thus not only were the lengthy separations bad enough, but when Joseph was home he was often prostrated with exhaustion and illness. Furthermore, the family’s constant relocations within both Wisconsin and Michigan, the stresses of the daily care of six children,<sup>19</sup> the loss of two young children (1855 and 1858), threats from infectious diseases, and financial stringencies all added to the impact of the husband’s absences.

One has to have some sympathy for the plight of Mary(etta) Waggoner. But tough as her plight was, she did not receive much sympathy from Ellen White.

Her public confession contains a second telling revelation that opened up some disturbing and intimate insights into her character. They were most obviously apparent in her acknowledged spurning of the Holy Spirit,” which had been in “the testimony given [her] through vision.” Her reaction included not just rejection, but outright disbelief that “at other times” caused her to “despise the visions.” Clearly Mary(etta) here referred to the “counsel” of the Adventist prophet, Ellen White.

### ELLEN WHITE AND THE JOSEPH WAGGONER FAMILY

Since Joseph's conversion to Sabbatarian Adventism in the early 1850s, a growing relationship had developed between James and Ellen White and Waggoner. The Whites had collaborated with him in sharing editorial duties at the *Review and Herald* publishing office as well as revival work, itinerant evangelism, the instituting of formal church organization, and various theological developments. Joseph Waggoner had been a strong support to the Whites during numerous debates over controversial issues. They also requested him to revise and edit a manuscript that eventually emerged as the 1888 edition of *Life Sketches of James and Ellen White*.<sup>20</sup>

The Whites had also manifested a significant degree of personal care for and interest in the Waggoner family.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, Ellet Waggoner would develop a warm friendship with W. C. (Willie or Will) White, the young son of James and Ellen.<sup>22</sup> Thus it should come as no surprise that Ellen White would feel free to share her inspired letters of counsel with Joseph and Mary(etta) Waggoner.

What follows is one of the most painful passages in the life of Ellet and his family. I present it solely (1) to clarify the domestic dynamics (both the positive and the negative) that affected the maturation of the young Ellet Waggoner and (2) to show how such influences helped to shape later chapters in his life. Also I retrace them in order (3) to demonstrate the persistently redemptive nature of Ellen White's attempts not only to correct, but to heal personal lives (for time and eternity) and to restore ministries on the brink of irretrievable loss.

Were it not for Ellen White's letters of "counsel," the publicly published confessions of Mary(etta) Waggoner would have left posterity only guessing as to the details of her troubles and how they affected the development of her children. Aside from these two sources (the *Review and Herald* confession and the Ellen White letters of counsel and correction), we have little evidence of the family life of the Joseph Waggoner family and its most famous son.

### ELLEN WHITE AND MARY(ETTA) WAGGONER: THE "SOBERING COUNSEL"

The first known communication of warning and correction appeared in a letter to J. H. Waggoner dated April 19, 1860.<sup>23</sup> The epistle opened with a rather general concern for the "messengers [that is, Adventist min-