

More about Peter Wessels

ADDITIONAL HISTORICAL FACTS ABOUT THIS MAN AND HIS FAMILY

We recently released the Peter Wessels cassette tape (*The Story of Peter Wessels*, \$10.00 ppd.) and a transcription (typed copy) of that tape (*The Story of Peter Wessels [WM-1212]*). Those of you who have heard the tape recognize the humble sincerity and attention to detail on the part of the narrator, Van Nierkerk, the great-grandson of Peter Wessels. That alone is a strong indication of the genuineness of his story.

However, we have been told that there are rumors that the Peter Wessels story is not true. What are the facts in the case? Did a Peter Wessels even exist? Checking carefully into this, we have learned the following:

First, we will tell you the legends which are not true:

(1) It is said that Ellen White predicted that, because they were not using their money for God's glory, the diamonds owned by the Wessels family "would turn to dust." Fortunately, that fabrication is neither on our tape or transcribed tract.

(2) Ellen White is said to have predicted that the Wessels' sanitarium would burn down. That erroneous idea is also not on our tape or tract. Our tape / tract relates how she sent Peter a number of letters and that the sanitarium burned to the ground; but the tape / tract did not say that she predicted that this would happen. Therefore, our tape / tract is accurate as far as we can tell.

We are thankful that we have been able to clarify this. **However, as a result of our research, we learned more about Peter Wessels and his family. Here is what we learned. You will find it to be a fascinating addition to Van Nierkerk's narrative, as given on the tape and transcribed in our tract; both are named *The Story of Peter Wessels*.**

The earliest European colonists to settle in South Africa were the Dutch (who called themselves Africaners). They established a settlement at the Cape of Good Hope in 1652. It was not until the country became a British possession in 1814 that British immigration began. (The white population today is approximately 60% Africaners who speak a type of Dutch and 40% who speak English.)

Pieter (written Peter in English, but Pieter in Afrikaans) Wessels was born, in 1856, in the Orange Free State of South Africa. He was born into a large rural Dutch family of moderate prosperity. From his childhood, Pieter was an earnest Christian and ridi-

culed by his brothers because he would not allow his windmill (which pulled water up for the house and crops) to turn on Sundays.

When he reached adulthood, Pieter slipped away somewhat from his earlier Christian experience. However, at the age of 29, he became severely ill and felt certain he was going to die. He was confined to his bed with a severe attack of what was described as "inflammation of the lungs." He had tuberculosis. The year was 1885.

Pleading with God for forgiveness for years spent not close to Him, Pieter began reading the Bible again. In the book of James, he came upon the instruction for how to pray for the sick (*James 5:14-16*).

Deeply impressed, Pieter fell on his knees, rededicated his life to God, and pled for healing if it be God's will. And then he fell asleep and slept soundly.

The next morning, when he arose, he was totally healed; he never was troubled with tuberculosis throughout the remainder of his life.

Once again, Pieter rededicated his life to God and left the room, eager to share the news of what Heaven had done for him. He immediately discarded all his bottles of drug medications and determined never again to take the poisons.

Shortly after this, Pieter's brother John stopped by to visit and was surprised to find that he had been totally healed. However, when John mentioned that he was not feeling well, Pieter urged him not to go to the physicians, but to pray to God for healing. John, a deacon in the Dutch Reformed Church, was upset at Pieter's enthusiasm and told him the Bible should not be taken so literally.

John, a faithful Sundaykeeper, told him that if he, Pieter, was such a good Christian and so concerned to urge others to do what the Bible said, he ought to do something else it said—keep the Bible Sabbath! The logic was unanswerable: John told Pieter that—if he was going to follow the Bible exactly—he ought to keep the Sabbath on the seventh day of the week. John led the protesting man to a calendar on the wall and bade him look at it, and see for himself: The Sabbath is the seventh day and Sunday is the first day.

This was something new which Pieter had never considered. Truly astonished (for Pieter had always staunchly defended the proper observance of Sunday), Pieter determined to prove his brother wrong. Carefully he set to work, beginning at Genesis and

working his way through the Bible. But all it told him was that the seventh-day Sabbath was the only weekly holy day; Sunday, the first day, had no sacredness in Holy Writ.

Therefore, in November 1885, Pieter abandoned the Dutch Reformed Church and began keeping the Bible Sabbath. He did not know whether any other people in the entire world kept the Bible Sabbath, but that did not matter. He was determined that his family would.

At this juncture, we need to return to an earlier time in history. William Hunt had been mining for gold and silver in Nevada when, during a trip to California, he was converted to the Adventist Church at an evangelistic meeting conducted by J.N. Loughborough.

Upon hearing of the diamond rush in South Africa, Hunt immediately took a ship to Cape Town, and then went to the diamond diggings in Griqualand West. Hunt had brought with him a supply of tracts and papers, which he was distributing to anyone interested in the message.

As early as 1878, Hunt had convinced some South Africans that Adventism was correct. One of those interested people, J.H.C. Wilson wrote a letter to the *Review*, in which he spoke of reading copies of the *Signs of the Times* that led him to acknowledge that “the truth is with you; I have since that time taken a stand for the truth and am determined, with the help and blessing of God, to keep all His commandments.” Nothing more is known of Wilson after that. Although the Church was established in South Africa about a decade later, there is no record of his ever being a member.

Hunt was heavily criticized and openly ridiculed by the other Africaners. But he resolutely kept observing the Bible Sabbath and telling others they should also.

One day in early 1885, G.J. (Henry) Van Druten, a Beaconsfield businessman, was driving through town with his wife in their horse-drawn buggy, when they passed William Hunt walking on the street.

Turning to his wife, Van Druten said, “See that old man, people say that he is lazy because he keeps two Sundays.” (Hunt kept the Bible Sabbath but, out of respect to the Africaners, did not work on Sunday.) Van Druten’s wife replied, “He looks like an old saint to me.” That reply intrigued the businessman; and so, soon after, he stopped by and visited Hunt in his little shack of a room, attached to the back of a home. As fast as Van Druten could ask questions, Hunt answered them from the Bible. When they got to the Sabbath, Hunt explained it so well that Van Druten began observing it with his family.

That brings us back to 1885, when young Pieter Wessels also began keeping the Bible Sabbath. Shortly after he did so, while talking to his neighbor, G.J. (Henry) Van Druten (misspelled “Druden” on our previous tract, because we copied it from the tape), Pieter was startled to discover that Henry had recently begun keeping the Bible Sabbath also. Thrilled at this discovery, the two families began keeping it together.

We will return to this meeting of Pieter and Van Druten later in our story; for, as we will discover, a remarkable number of events occurred between 1885 and 1887!

Pieter shared the news about the Sabbath with many people. Anxious to tell everyone, he visited his friend, Dr. Andrew Murray, about 30 miles away in Wellington. Murray was the leading theologian in South Africa. (You may have seen his books; he is the author which seems to come the closest to the spiritual level of the Spirit of Prophecy volumes. However, upon careful examination I found that they still came far short of her writings. Nothing approaches Inspiration.)

When Pieter shared the Sabbath truth with Murray that Friday evening, Murray acknowledged the truth of the Bible Sabbath; but he felt that, because of his important position in the Dutch Reformed Church, he dare not openly acknowledge it. However, he encouraged Pieter to persevere in sharing the message.

Among many whom Pieter influenced to keep the Bible Sabbath was his brother-in-law, Gert J.G. Sholtz. Immediately Sholtz won his wife to the truth; and then he traveled to the Transvaal and told Paul Kruger, the president of the South Africa Republic. Kruger admitted the Sabbath was right but said that, because of his position, he dared not keep it.

Returning to the Free State, Scholtz won two prominent de Beer families, who with their children and grandchildren later became staunch Adventists.

On the farm of one of these families (Nicholas de Beer) diamonds were found. Later, when the farm was sold to the diamond magnates of Kimberley, part of the fortune the de Beer family made from the sale went to help the young church.

So much was taking place so rapidly, that it is now time to return to Pieter’s first meeting with G.J. Van Druten, or Henry as he was also called.

The two first met at Pieter’s farm when Annie, Pieter’s youngest child, was born. As they visited, they discovered that they both were keeping the seventh-day Sabbath.

Shortly afterward, Pieter met Hunt when, one Sabbath, he saw him three tents over from his tent in the diggings also reading the Bible.

1 From Hunt, for the first time Pieter learned about
2 the Seventh-day Adventist Church in America—an
1 entire denomination of 30,000 members which was
4 keeping the Bible Sabbath!

Hunt urged Pieter to write to the General Conference in Battle Creek. This he did; and he did more: In that letter, he said that if they would send missionaries to South Africa, he would help cover expenses. Van Druten also offered to help with part of those expenses. Enclosed with the letter was 50 pounds (equivalent to several thousand dollars today), to help pay initial transportation expenses. The year was 1886. As you can see, a lot had happened since 1885, when both Pieter and Van Druten first became Sabbathkeepers.

When the letter was read at the 1886 General Conference Session in the Battle Creek Tabernacle, the entire congregation was electrified. Immediately, they all stood and sang the doxology!

The first missionary party consisted of D.A. Robinson, C.L. Boyd, their wives, two colporteurs (George Burleigh and R.S. Anthony), and a Bible instructor (Miss Carrie Mace). They sailed from New York City on May 11, 1887.

Eagerly the Wessels, the Van Druten family, and William Hunt awaited the missionaries who arrived in July.

Pieter met them at the dock in Cape Town (which in the Africaners' language is called Kaapstad); he also helped guide them in getting settled and beginning their work in this strange, new land.

D.A. Robinson remained at the Cape and worked there (initially giving non-denominational lectures in the Dutch Reformed churches) while Boyd proceeded to the diamond fields, where he found about ten already keeping the seventh-day Sabbath, including a number of children.

Within a month, a baptism took place and a church of 21 members was organized. A month later, still more were baptized; and the movement spread.

The first Adventist Church building was erected in Beaconsfield, where Van Druten lived. Built of wood and iron, it is today a historical monument.

By this time, Robinson was holding evangelistic meetings in Cape Town; and the canvassers were going door-to-door, selling Uriah Smith's *Daniel and Revelation*.

In January 1888, a tent sent from Battle Creek arrived and was pitched in a sheltered spot in Cape Town. The next month, Ira J. Hankins and his family arrived to assist in the meetings.

About four years later, Asa T. Robinson arrived; and in 1892 the first conference was formed. The work progressed rapidly thereafter.

Meanwhile, Pieter was busily sharing the Sab-

bath truth with still more people. Back then, all supplies were transported by ox wagon from the Cape. One day, Albert Davies and D. Fletcher Tarr arrived with their wagons and camped close to a farm near Kimberly on Friday afternoon. Knocking on the door of Pieter's home, Davies asked if they could pay to graze the animals over the weekend. The owner of the farm, young Pieter Wessels, replied, "Let the oxen graze; we will come to terms another day."

Inviting him into the home, Pieter immediately began telling him the news about the Bible Sabbath. (Back then the Sabbath was a thrilling topic of conversation to Advent believers!) He invited the two campers to return the following morning and hear more.

Deeply impressed, Davies hurried back to the camp and told Tarr, a lay Methodist preacher who was shocked to hear that a man could be so misguided as to keep Saturday for the Sabbath.

The next morning was Sabbath; and, although Tarr refused to go, Davies returned to Pieter's home. Already he was more than half convinced the Sabbath was right.

Sunday morning, a nice-appearing young man in very clean clothing (the identity of whom no one seems to know) suddenly arrived at the camp and asked Tarr to give him Biblical support for Sunday-keeping. Tarr prided himself on knowing the Bible somewhat well; and he tried to supply the reasons,—but found he really did not have any. Then the young man left as mysteriously as he had arrived.

Now, thoroughly aroused, Tarr spent several days reading *The History of the Sabbath*, by J.N. Andrews, a copy of which he found on Davies' bed. Within 13 days after his arrival, next to Pieter's farm, Tarr began keeping the Bible Sabbath.

Fletcher Tarr immediately went to Kimberly and began helping C.L. Boyd, a newly arrived Adventist missionary in a series of evangelistic meetings. From there he continued on, holding meetings elsewhere.

Later he studied at Battle Creek and returned to pioneer the work in many parts of South Africa.

The Wessels family owned several farms near Kimberly. Pieter Wessels' father sold one, where a rich diamond mine had already been found, to the de Beers Company for 35,000 pounds. (We will later read how Pieter sold another at a great loss.)

Wessels' father carefully managed that small fortune for the remainder of his life, giving much money to the struggling young Church. (In 1892, shortly before his death, he gave 3,900 pounds to erect a the Cape Town Church and the conference offices.

At one time or another, most of Father Wessels' children visited Church headquarters at Battle Creek; and some of them, including Pieter, attended

Battle Creek College.

When Pieter and his brothers returned from Battle Creek to South Africa, they were fired with the ambition to erect institutions there similar to those in Battle Creek.

In 1892, Claremont Union College (now Helderberg College) was built and fully equipped at a cost of 7,000 pounds.

Treatment rooms and a printing plant were opened in Cape Town; and an orphanage was opened in Plumstead.

The largest project was the construction of the Claremont Sanitarium, a 51-room medical center near Cape Town. It cost about 50,000 pounds.

Pieter himself invested a large amount of money in the college, the church, and the sanitarium in Cape Town.

You should understand that, at the time that these large projects were under construction, there were not more than 250 Adventists in all of South Africa! The large fortune of the Wessels was the source of what was done.

Pieter attended the March 1893 General Conference Session in Battle Creek and reported that immense allotments of free land were available from the government. This produced a controversy at the Session, as to whether the Church should receive free land from the government. A.T. Jones was against the idea. But it was resolved by a statement from Ellen White (*Testimonies to Ministers, 197-203*), that when God sends gifts, we should accept them, regardless of whether they come from worldlings or governments.

In 1894, Pieter Wessels and Asa T. Robinson visited Cecil John Rhodes, prime minister of the Cape Colony and chairman of the Charter Company, to request a grant of land in the newly opened territory to the north, so they could establish mission work there.

He sent Pieter and several church members north to Bulawayo, with a letter to Dr. S. Jameson, his representative there, to give the Adventists all the land they could use. Permission was granted. Wessels and the other workers proceeded to locate and peg out an immense farm (4,000 acres, according to the tape; but 12,000 acres according to Church records). It later became Solusi Mission.

In 1895, Mother Wessels (Pieter's mother), two sons (Daniel 16 and Andrew 14), and her daughter Annie and her husband, Harmon Lindsay, and their infant child went on a one-year tour around the world, visited the General Conference Session in

Battle Creek, and stopped off in Australia to visit Ellen White in December. While there, they gave her 5,000 pounds.

In May 1896, the Wessels family sent 500 pounds to Ellen White, to help on the Avondale project (*Letter 58, 1896*). In September, Mother Wessels sent \$5,000. In October, another 1,000 pounds came from Mother Wessels (*Manuscript 55, 1896*). Another 50 pounds arrived in February 1897 (*Letter 130, 1897*).

(Another family member, John Wessels, went to Australia in 1899 to help locate the site for the Sydney Sanitarium and provide the concluding 1,300 of the total 2,200 pounds that were needed to purchase the property. In later years, he managed two sanitariums in southern California.)

But then followed the unfortunate experiences when, over a number of years, 69 letters were sent to Pieter from Ellen White; of which 64 had never been opened. Having read our earlier tract transcription from the tape, you know the rest of the story. But can we date this period of time? According to the tape, Pieter's sad experiences began soon after the construction of the sanitarium. We now know it was built in 1897. Pieter went into bankruptcy shortly after it burned down. This was at the same time that he sold a farm on which diamonds were found 28 days later. We now know the fire occurred in 1905, when Pieter was 49 years old. He then read the letters and began to prosper again. Pieter died, in 1933 in South Africa, at the age of 77.

Far from being a man who did not exist, Pieter Wessels was extremely influential. The Wessels consisted of a large family of several households, owning several farms in the Kimberly area. Pieter was the first to discover the Sabbath truth and he brought it to all the other Wessels. Pieter sold a farm 28 days before a diamond mine was found on it. His father, whom he had earlier brought into the Sabbath truth and thence into Adventism, sold his farm after diamonds were discovered on it; this resulted in a small fortune which he invested wisely. All of the Wessels helped the Adventist Church; later Pieter regained some wealth and helped again also.

It is worth noting that the same mistake was made with Pieter that is often made today: Adventist workers bring people into the Adventist message—without explaining to them the wonderful truth about the Spirit of Prophecy. Pieter loved the Sabbath and the Church; but it took years of painful hardships before he learned to value the Spirit of Prophecy counsels.

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