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93-157

September 20, 1993

SOUTH CAROLINA -- Retired China missionary Olive Lawton dies at 92; photo.

NORTH CAROLINA -- Prof/former missionary's fascination with Arab world began in Sunday school.

GEORGIA -- Gourds are his weapon for fighting world hunger; photo.

NASHVILLE -- End times/peace agreement quote ...

**Retired China missionary
Olive Lawton dies at 92**

**Baptist Press
9/20/93**

LAURENS, S.C. (BP)--Olive Lawton, one of this century's near-legendary women of Southern Baptist missions in China, died Sept. 18 at age 92.

Lawton died at the Martha Franks Baptist Retirement Center in Laurens, S.C., which she helped Franks found in 1968.

Like Franks, who died last year, and the late Bertha Smith, Lawton showed what single-minded dedication could accomplish in the dangerous, bloody landscape of a changing China. Her own motto: "God first, others second, self last."

Born in China in 1901 and reared there by missionary parents Wesley and Ida Lawton, she returned as a missionary in 1924. Three of her five brothers and sisters, Mary, Wesley Jr. and Deaver, also returned to China as missionaries.

Lawton taught in several mission schools, then began working with churches in Honan Province in 1930. Her assignments included traveling with a "gospel band" that held evangelistic tent meetings in country areas.

Civil chaos reigned in many parts of China in the '30s, and the Japanese invasion made mission work even more difficult. Lawton called her mission field the "front-line trenches" for God amid "the devils' shells." She shared the gospel with soldiers and refugees on crowded trains, with the sick and dying in hospitals.

Cut off from her mission station by war in 1937, she traced a roundabout route back and returned to work. But she eventually found herself in occupied territory and was interned in a Japanese concentration camp for more than eight months after the United States entered the Pacific war.

Lawton cooked rotten buffalo meat and picked worms out of the rice she ate to survive, but she once said imprisonment wasn't traumatic. "If the Lord leads that way, you don't have to waste your energy feeling sorry for yourself," she explained. "He's the good shepherd, and he goes ahead every time he puts his sheep out."

Repatriated to the United States in 1943, she studied, spoke on behalf of missions and waited for her chance to go back to China. It came in 1947, but communism was taking hold of the nation by that time, and eventually her Chinese Christian friends faced persecution for associating with her or any other missionary.

She transferred in 1950 to Taiwan -- one of the first Southern Baptist missionaries to go there.

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Lawton helped establish churches in several Taiwan cities and kept up a rigorous schedule of teaching Bible classes, working with Baptist women's organizations and personal evangelism until she retired in 1965. Besides helping found the retirement center in Laurens, she often spoke in churches and mission conferences until her death.

She "cried with delight" when she learned in recent years that Chinese churches were reopening and Christian ranks had grown during the worst years of communist repression. She visited there in 1986, embracing believers who had survived and hearing of others who died. One church that counted 40 members when she left had more than 1,000.

Lawton received the bachelor of arts degree from Winthrop College in Rock Hill, S.C., and the bachelor of missionary training degree from the Woman's Missionary Union Training School (now merged with Southern Baptist Theological Seminary) in Louisville, Ky.

She is survived by one brother, retired missionary Deaver Lawton of Asheville, N.C.

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(BP) photo (mugshot) mailed to state Baptist newspapers by Richmond bureau of Baptist Press. Cutline available on SBCNet Newsroom.

EDITORS' NOTE: This story can be used in tandem with (BP) story titled "Islamic expert says Baptists need to look past Muslim stereotypes," dated 9/1/93.

Prof/former missionary's fascination
with Arab world began in Sunday school

Baptist Press
9/20/93

By Jon Walker

WAKE FOREST, N.C. (BP)--The Arab world has always held a fascination for George Braswell. Long before he and his wife became the first Southern Baptist missionaries to Iran, he was captivated by the biblical story of the Persian King Cyrus releasing the children of Israel from their Babylonian captivity and by the story of the Iranian Magi bringing gifts to the baby Jesus.

"My Sunday school teachers, by emphasizing these great biblical stories, had a lot to do with my interest in the Arab world," said Braswell, currently professor of missions at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, N.C.

Those images stayed with Braswell as he studied for the ministry, majoring in missions, and then they were instrumental in helping him realize God was calling him to overseas missions. In 1968 George and his wife, Joan, were appointed by the Foreign Mission Board as the first Southern Baptist missionaries to Iran.

"It was very different in those days for a Baptist missionary to go to an Islamic country," Braswell said. "It was slow. We had to build relational bridges. We had to build a trust with the Iranian officials because they didn't know who Christians were, much less who Baptists were.

"Rather than being immediately confrontational, in the Islamic world you need to build trust," Braswell added. "Your testimony needs to be forceful, but you need to select a time and place in order to do that."

These lessons in cross-cultural communication had a dynamic effect on Braswell, leading him to simultaneously pursue two degrees while on furlough from Iran: a doctor of ministry in missions from Southeastern Seminary and a Ph.D. in cultural anthropology with an emphasis on the Middle East and Islam from the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill.

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Through this academic rigor, Braswell hoped to better be able to communicate the gospel to Muslims. However, God had other plans and Braswell was invited to teach missions at Southeastern. He has become "the finest scholar teaching missions in a Southern Baptist school today," according to Sam James, vice president for Europe, the Middle East and North Africa at the Foreign Mission Board and a friend of Braswell's since his seminary days.

Providentially, Braswell's cross-cultural witness is expanding beyond his own energies to include many ministerial students and a large portion of the U.S. military. Before the Gulf War, Braswell was invited to Ft. Bragg, N.C., where he trained troops in cross-cultural communication.

"A lot of boys came back from the Gulf alive because George spent time with them," said Army Chaplain Larry Eakes, who studied for his D. Min. under Braswell at Southeastern.

Eakes has enlisted Braswell's academic abilities and devotional depth for several military training programs. He said Braswell even planted the seed which led to the development of a small card some troops carried with them in the Persian Gulf that reminded them of the cultural differences they would encounter "once they jumped out of the airplane."

From Braswell, learning to understand the other culture's perspective is all part of sharing the gospel.

"We know we live in a pluralistic world with all kinds of diverse cultures and religious ideology and religious practices," Braswell said. "It's somewhat like the Apostle Paul going to Athens and saying, 'I see you are very religious people.'

"My concern is that we acknowledge their religiosity. We need to understand who they are, who they claim to be, who they know themselves to be and where their loyalties and allegiances are in this world so that we might then say, 'Look, here's what the Christian faith has to say. Here's what it has to offer to you. Here's what the Bible says and this is what Jesus Christ means to me.'"

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Gourds are his weapon
for fighting world hunger

By James Dotson

Baptist Press
9/20/93

ROYSTON, Ga. (BP)--Gourds are a peculiar crop, known more for their usefulness as birdhouses than anything resembling nutrition. But the woody, offbeat cousin of the squash family also happens to be one of the best tools George and Imogene Cobb have found for helping feed the world.

For the past nine years, the Cobbs -- now retired, but unable to give up a lifetime of farming -- have grown gourds and other fruits and vegetables, with all of their sales receipts going to a trust to fund Southern Baptist world hunger causes into perpetuity.

The 71-year-old farmer said their "project," as he has called the effort, began when he realized there was something a farmer in the United States could do for the starving in other countries, even if direct shipment of produce was not practical.

"I wondered why just somehow or other we couldn't just pick that food up and give it to the missionaries and let the missionaries give it to those hungry people," he said. "I can't send the food over, but I can sell the food and give the money for the missionaries to buy food and give it away to people."

Cobb said his interest in world hunger can be traced to a Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting in the late 1960s or early '70s, when a missionary spoke about the starving people on his field. Cobb wasn't there, but his pastor at the time, Bill Walker of Pleasant Hill Baptist Church in Franklin County, Ga., brought the message home.

"It really made an impression on him. And for the next two or three Sundays that was his topic," Cobb said, adding he began giving to Southern Baptist world hunger causes regularly at that time.

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Cobb had been a successful farmer for years in Franklin County, despite a crippling back deformity attributed to arthritis that has plagued him since he was 26 years old. He still jokes about it being caused by "the girls pulling on me" and how he recognizes people by their shoes, but he says it is the continued activity that keeps the problem from growing worse.

In 1974, the Cobbs sold their farm and retired. They moved to a small home with no land near their previous property, then after Cobb realized he would not be happy without any land to farm they bought their current property on U.S. 29 between Royston and Hartwell.

"We're workaholics, the woman and I both," he said. "We wouldn't be happy if we weren't doing something."

Their interest in gourds began when a friend gave Cobb a gourd and asked him to try growing them; she had wanted to grow them for birdhouses, but her husband had vetoed the idea because of concerns about cross-pollination with their cantaloupes.

The first year, he grew one row. Then people started asking about buying the raw gourds or the birdhouses he makes from them, Cobb said. The gourd soon became his most popular crop, with all proceeds going to world hunger.

But he said he began thinking of how his efforts could be more effective.

"I don't know, I guess me being a farmer, I've always tried to make one seed become a whole lot more, take one grain of corn and make it be a thousand grains of corn. And I just kind of got the idea that there ought to be a better way than what we were doing with world hunger. ... And I got this idea of a trust fund."

His idea was taken on by the Hebron (Ga.) Baptist Association, and he enlisted members of First Baptist Church in Royston and his current church, Bethany Baptist, to become regular contributors.

"We challenged the people to give the price of one nice meal each first Sunday. We told them the Lord has given them 90 meals a month; surely they can give the price of one to people that don't have any," Cobb said.

Initially, the fund was handled by the director of missions for the association, but two years ago it was transferred to the Georgia Baptist Foundation, which could give a better return than the fund had been drawing from certificates of deposit.

He said the trust now has about \$60,000, drawing at least 8.5 percent annually that goes directly to Home and Foreign Mission boards' world hunger programs.

One of Cobb's biggest years was 1992, when the profits to world hunger totaled some \$12,000. With only their own labor and a tractor, they planted eight acres of gourds (about 15,000), in addition to several acres of cantaloupes, tomatoes, grapes and other produce. (They only own about eight acres, but other landowners often let Cobb work their land in exchange for cleaning up the fields.)

Cobb's notoriety also has grown in recent years. An article in the Athens Banner-Herald was picked up by Augusta and Atlanta newspapers, and a correspondent for the Los Angeles Times did an article that has brought a flood of orders from the West Coast. Two of his most recent shipments of gourds were to Beverly Hills.

This year, a combination of heat and drought promise a small harvest, enough of a setback to prompt him to think about cutting back seriously on his project. But he likes to point out the way the program is set up, with the impact of his efforts going on forever.

"That's where the sweet part of it comes in. I've heard preachers all my life say that these are the last days, that it wouldn't be long before the Lord's going to call us all home," he said. "It hasn't happened yet, and we don't know how long this world is going to be here, but we were working some numbers the other day and figured that if this world would stand another hundred years, even if we didn't put another penny in it, we would be buying over a half million dollars worth of food."

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(BP) photo available upon request from The Christian Index, Georgia Baptists' newsjournal.

EDITORS' NOTE: Baptist Press has asked several Southern Baptist scholars to comment on 1) whether the Bible speaks in any way concerning the peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians and 2) whether this agreement in any way reflects a view of the end times. This response concludes this (BP) series.

COMMENTARY

On the peace agreement
and the end times ...

By Samuel Shahid

Baptist Press
9/20/93

I do not believe there is any straightforward prophesy in the Bible pertaining to the current Arab-Israeli treaty. However, I do believe there is at least one interesting indication in the Old Testament that may point to the present reconciliation. It is, in my opinion, a symbol. The Bible tells us the story of Jacob and Esau. After so many years of hostility between the two brothers, they reconciled. They met together, embraced each other and departed peacefully.

Such a record unfolds, in a symbolic way, the present patterns of current events among the Arabs and Israelis. The difficult point no one can really predict is: How long does this reconciliation last? Would it really contribute to the world peace?

The Bible alludes to human efforts to maintain a peaceful world. At the same time, the Bible made it clear that all human efforts will fail to establish a permanent peace.

How can we relate this treaty to the end times? It is difficult to say. It could be a step toward the end times. We should not isolate a single event from the total picture of the historical development. Despite that, we have to realize that God is behind the course of history. What is called "history" is but God's plan which he extended for the human race.

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Shahid, a native of Palestine who grew up in Jordan, is executive director of Good News for the Crescent World in Fairhaven, N.J., and member of nearby Monmouth Baptist Church. He is the author of 18 books in Arabic about Christianity and Islam.

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