

Our Mission: Researching, preserving and promoting the Legacy of Florida Baptists

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LEGACY, as the monthly newsletter of the Florida Baptist Historical Society, has as its mission to highlight the legacy forged by the people and events in Florida Baptist history. During 2023, the LEGACY's monthly issues will feature brief personal profiles of selected Florida Baptist men and women, who through their Christian commitment, have demonstrated Legacy Leadership in their ministry service on the Florida Baptist mission field. These persons, could join with the Apostle Paul, in declaring as "God's fellow workers" they have "laid a foundation" for God's kingdom on earth and upon which "someone else is building" [II Corinthians 3:9-10NIV].

Lula Sparkman Terry – A 45-Year Legacy of Missionary Service in Brazil

"I am engaged to Mr. A. J. Terry. He will finish at the seminary next year, and we expect to marry sometime in the summer," wrote Lula Sparkman, a 23-year-old student enrolled in the Women's Missionary Union Training School, (on the campus of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary), Louisville, Kentucky. Continuing in her December 28, 1910 handwritten letter to the SBC Foreign Mission Board, Miss Sparkman said, "I have always been interested in the Latin American people and though I am willing to work anywhere God sends me, I feel that my work should be among these people. . . I am the Lord's, and my prayer is that He may use my life as He sees best."

In less than six months after the letter was penned, Lula (sometimes pronounced and written as Lulie and Lulu) Sparkman and Adolph John Terry (b. July 5, 1883; d. July 22, 1945) of Evergreen, Louisiana, were wed on June 8, 1911 in Palmetto, Florida. The couple had met and dated while attending their respective schools on the Louisville campus. Seven months later, they were appointed by the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board (now known as the International Mission Board) to active missionary service in Brazil. Just after their first wedding anniversary, in July 1912, the newlyweds sailed on a steamship that departed Miami for a week's journey to Recife, capital of the state of Pernambuco, Brazil.



For the next 45 years, Lula Sparkman Terry, as Florida Baptists' first woman and second native to be appointed as a Southern Baptist international missionary, reflected a legacy of commitment of life and heart to sharing the gospel with the people Brazil. The long-term missionary came to epitomize that, "Missions isn't always a glowing light; there is suffering and sacrifice, and the responsibility of a cross to bear," Sue Terry Woodson once wrote about her parents' life commitment.

Lula Sparkman was born May 24, 1887, in Wauchula, Florida, to Susan Elizabeth Futch Sparkman and Thomas J. Sparkman (b. 1842; d. 1916), a pioneer Baptist pastor in Southwest Florida, who at the time of Lula's birth was serving as the pastor of the Hopewell Baptist Church, Plant City. Lula had four brothers: Hugh (b. 1880); Walter (b. 1884); William Carey (b. 1891); Charles

Spurgeon (b. 1894); and two sisters: Mary (b. 1878) and Maude (b. 1882). Lula accepted Christ as her Saviour in 1898, and was baptized in the Peace River at Arcadia, Florida.

Floridian T. J. Bowen was First SBC Foreign Missionary Assigned to Brazil

Courage and determination are certainly two descriptive characteristics required of anyone who in the early twentieth century responded to God's call for mission service and going to the largest and one of the most under-developed countries in the South American continent. Southern Baptist mission work in Brazil had begun as early as 1859 and continued for three years through the undistinguished and failed efforts of former Florida pastor Thomas Jefferson Bowen and others. Yet it was not until 1880 that the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board made a second attempt to send evangelical missionaries to the South American country. The renewed effort consisted of appointed missionaries William and Anne Bagby of Texas who sailed to the Brazil's then capital Rio de Janeiro in March 1881.

No doubt Adolph Terry and Lula Sparkman, while still students in Southern Seminary, were inspired and challenged by the growing missionary needs and opportunities that existed in Brazil. It was in Louisville that the couple heard a presentation by T. Bronson Ray, educational secretary of the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board, and Reverend F. F. Soren, pastor of the First Baptist Church in Rio de Janeiro and first president of the Brazilian Convention. Ray had recently toured Brazil and recorded his impressions of Southern Baptists' missionary efforts in a book titled, *Brazilian Sketches*. **Ray stressed that the demand for missionary efforts in Brazil was as imperative as in "any other heathen country [in which] the gospel is not preached to the people."**

"Spiritism, materialism and atheism are rampant" in Brazil, reported T.B. Ray, who characterized Brazilians as "people set adrift without spiritual guides." Despite Brazil's prevalent Catholicism, "The priests do not preach" the gospel, Ray observed. In his travel diary Ray affirmed that, "the priests hold services," which he said consisted of saying mass, reading prayers and singing songs in Latin, "a language which is not understood by the people."

Beginning Evangelistic Work In the Piaui Province

Confronting Brazil's economic, ethnic and religious diversity the Terrys in 1912 joined with nearly four dozen fellow Southern Baptist missionaries and nearly 125 native Brazilian pastor/evangelists who sought to share the claims of Christ, although scattered across Brazil's vastness. During a year of Portuguese language study in Recife, the largest city in the Pernambuco province, the Terrys experienced the birth of their first child, Daniel Brunson (b. 1919; d. 1985). The family then moved to Teresina in the Piaui province to begin their evangelistic work. At that time only two indigenous Baptist churches, with a combined membership of fifty Brazilian Baptists, and located 500 miles apart, existed in the entire province. Their assigned mission station's territory stretched 900 miles north to south and over 300 miles wide at some points.

However, travel to their new home could not occur until the rainy season which grew grasses on the plains and in the hills. It was essential that grass was available to power their transportation – horses and mules. **It took two weeks of travel by horseback and river craft – inasmuch as neither highways nor railroads had been laid into the deep interior of the country – to reach their mission station.** Adolph and Lula each rode a horse, with Adolph carrying Brunson in his arms. They were followed by a hired man who led the four pack mules that carried everything the family would need in the months to follow – clothes, food, Bibles, Testaments, evangelistic tracts, cooking utensils, and a portable pump organ for their new church. At night they camped on the ground with the stars as their ceiling. During the day's journey they contended with the blazing hot sun and the occasional rain and the pesky local insects.

Once established in Teresina, Adolph Terry's assignment required him to often leave Lula and Brunson at their home base while he and a local guide travelled to distance settlements to share the gospel and start a church. **In one year alone, Adolph travelled 700 miles on horseback and nearly 1000 miles on the river boats. In many ways Adolph Terry was a circuit rider preacher who travelled from settlements to villages to share the gospel and occasionally establish a church.** Typically, he sought to enlist and train a Brazilian – recently converted to evangelical Christianity – to lead the newly established mission church until Terry could return to encourage the saints and administer the baptism of new converts. Adolph Terry's efforts by 1918 had helped quadruple the number of Baptist mission churches to six in the Piaui province.

Wherever the Terrys travelled, despite the lack of an electronic means of communication, their reputation as Christian evangelists preceded them. They were often asked spontaneously to share their faith, lead worship services or perform baptismal services. As was often the case, the Terrys were humbly amazed at the desire by the Brazilians to further the Christian witness in their respective remote settlement. **Baptist missionaries and their Christian converts in Brazil often encountered the wrath of the Catholic priests and anti-Christian zealots.** In one of his early reports to the Foreign Mission Board, Adolph Terry wrote, "The priests continue in their efforts to fanaticize the people against the gospel . . ."

Despite the potential dangers to the life and property of believers and missionaries alike, the Terrys were not deterred. If anything, they were encouraged by the commitment of the indigenous Christians. **"I came to Piaui to do evangelistic work, but that has been taken away from me by the Christian laymen who evangelized faster than we can follow up their work and train the converts,"** Mrs. Terry later told the Foreign Mission Board's *Commission* magazine. Lula Terry, as did most of the female missionary personnel of that era, taught homemaking and parenting skills to the local women to gain their trust and openness to hearing the Gospel message. Missionary Adolph Terry also used literacy training through Bible studies among the men and women as another means of evangelism.

While the Brazilians were enthusiastic to share their new-found Christian faith and start mission churches, the Terrys determined that furthering the work in Brazil's interior would require a school to train workers and educate the natives. In 1917 the North Brazil Mission assigned two missionaries to work with the Terrys to study the possibility of starting such a school. In the same year their daughter Susan (b. 1917; d. 2002) was born.

Re-locating to Corrente To Build a Training School

Now parents to two children and committed to follow the Lord's leading, the Terrys joined with another missionary couple to travel 800 miles from Teresina to Corrente, where the school would be established. "Brunson was nearly five years old then; so, he rode his own pony. But four-month-old Sue had to be carried. Her cradle was the arms of the cowboy who carried her on his mule, and the lullabies she heard were the songs he sang," Lula Terry told *Commission* writer Margaret Johnston. Once they got settled in their new home Lula remarked to Adolph that they would "have to keep the mule and cowboy to put Sue to sleep."

Although the Terrys were theologically trained, their re-location to the deep interior of the Piaui province, required tough physical labor, patience and ingenuity. Adolph Terry helped open a road through a mountain pass from the river 50 miles away so their belongings could be hauled into Corrente by oxcart. **Lula Terry became a carpenter, helping build furniture for her home, the school and the church. She oversaw the planting and cultivating of the family's food, hulling the family's rice and grinding their corn.** She also was the small town's default "nurse" and "doctor" having only rudimentary medical knowledge, as the nearest medical doctor was 200 miles away.

In 1922 the Baptist Industrial Institute was established in Corrente, just three years after A. J. Terry's God-inspired vision. The school served a variety of purposes including providing basic religious education to children, training local workers in agricultural and medical skills, and providing basic theological training for the indigenous Brazilians who had responded to God's call to serve as evangelists and pastors.

In 1927 the Terrys returned to the United States on furlough. They arranged to leave their teenaged children – Brunson and Sue – with family to pursue an American high school education. The Terrys returned to Brazil to resume their mission assignment, despite Adolph's developing heart-related problems. "No one knows the loneliness of the hours she spent without her children and her husband as she took care of the responsibilities that were hers," Florida W.M.U. worker Elizabeth Provence chronicled.

In 1931 Adolph Terry's declining health required that the couple leave the high, dry plateaus of central Brazil and take their missionary zeal to the coast, where they were assigned to Rio de Janeiro's Baptist College and Seminary. Adolph was appointed as an administrator of the college and Lula continued to work with children, young people and women in the local church. In 1936 the couple was assigned to Victoria, in the Espirito Santo province, where they did general evangelistic work. **By 1940, Lula Terry reported there were 75 churches – in addition to 357 mission congregations and preaching points – with a total 7,911 members within the province.** "Many churches have no pastor and some do not even receive an annual visit from the general worker (missionary). The laymen evangelize, but now we need men to train and develop the church members," Mrs. Terry wrote. To train the local Baptist leadership, the Terrys and fellow missionaries R. Elton and Elizabeth Johnson, organized and conducted in the Pernambuco province, local and regional training institutes that emphasized courses on the Baptist faith, practice and theology.

Adolph's Declining Health

In May, 1940, Lula Terry wrote a letter to Florida WMU expressing thanks for a financial gift the organization had sent. "In July we will complete 28 years of service in Brazil. These have been happy years." She went on to report that the couple might have to "give up our work in Victoria on account of Mr. Terry's health. The doctor says that he should be in a climate that is less changeable." She requested her friends in the homeland to continue in their prayer support of the couple.

Although the Terrys served during the early half of the twentieth century when the world's attention was drawn to World Wars I and II, those events were literally "a world away" from the evangelistic endeavors of the Terrys and their fellow missionaries. Despite war conditions in the mid-1940s, the culmination of years of a worsening heart problem for Adolph required the Terrys to fly back to the United States to seek medical treatment during a planned furlough in 1944. Enroute on the train from Miami to Montgomery, Adolph's heart problems became more pronounced and the couple disembarked in Jacksonville, where he underwent medical treatment for nine days. A heart specialist agreed the couple could continue their travels to Louisiana, in order to seek treatment at the Southern Baptist Hospital in New Orleans. At the time, the hospital provided free medical care to Southern Baptist missionaries. Within a few days after being admitted to the New Orleans medical facility, Adolph Terry suffered a massive heart attack and died on Sunday, July 22, 1945, at age 62.



**Lula Terry Demonstrated
Courage, Good Humor and Faithfulness**

Lula Terry's response to her newly found circumstances bore witness to an assessment made several years later by a fellow missionary. "It is hard to describe a personality like Mrs. Terry," observed Kate Cox White, who served in the Bahia province. "Her courage in the face of dangers, difficulties that seem insurmountable; her good humor and her temper combine to make something unique and, unfortunately, very rare in this world." After a time of grieving, Lula Terry returned alone to the Pernambuco province, where she continued to minister and teach at the Baptist training school in Recife. **She returned as a widow, "with the hopes of inspiring some Brazilian young people to dedicate their lives to winning the vast interior to Christ** and thus help to bring about the realization of that dream of long ago – a Baptist empire in the heart of Brazil," she recalled several years later.



Just prior to her 1957 retirement, Lula Terry returned to her first love in Brazil, the Corrente's Industrial Institute, begun almost four decades earlier. When the Terrys established the school, the trip from the coast to Corrente took four to five weeks, traveling first by train, then by riverboat, which was likely to get stuck on a sand bar, and then by mule. Lula Terry's 1957 trip took only hours by airplane.

The missionary service and legacy of Adolph and Lula Sparkman Terry – combined with the efforts of nearly 200 other Southern Baptist missionaries assigned to Brazil – had made an indelible mark for the cause of Christ.

Lula Sparkman Terry retired from active missionary service at age 70 in May 1957 and moved to Florida. **Her young woman's dream of "spending her life" ministering in Brazil having been fulfilled.** On September 12, 1965, Lula Sparkman Terry died in the Homerville, Georgia, home of her son D. Brunson Terry, where she had recently re-located. Frank Means – who had served as the Foreign Mission Board's Area Secretary for Latin America, between 1954-68 – sent an expression of sympathy telegram to the Terry family. Means' final tribute to Lula Terry noted, "her influence will abide forever because she so zealously sought to do the Lord's will."

[RESOURCES: Donald S. Hepburn, "A Floridian's 45-Year Legacy of Missionary Service in Brazil," *The Journal of Florida Baptist Heritage*, Vol. 21, 2019; various reports and letters in the International Mission Board Archives, maintained by the Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives; Elizabeth Provence, *God's Troubadours*; R. B. Ray, *Brazilian Sketches*; A. R. Crabtree, "Mission in Brazil," *Encyclopedia of Southern Baptists, Vol. I*; Margaret Johnston, "Her Heart Is in the Heart of Brazil," *The Commission*, September, 1957; various articles, *Florida Baptist Witness*, May 16, 1940, May 1, 1941, November 4, 1943, and July 18, 1957; and "A Brilliant Career Comes to An End," *The Bunkie (Louisiana) Record*, July 27, 1945.]