

Chapter 2

“GO TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN” The Road Found

Dr. Albert and Flora Shelton

“To hear can be to understand, to understand may be to answer” - certainly when the Sheltons heard Dr. Susie Rijnhart speak to the Nebraska Convention of the Disciples of Christ they did not expect it to change their entire lives. They listened to her story - of her husband, Petrus, and her child, Charles, trekking the ranges and valleys of Tibet. They heard of their working tirelessly among the people of that wild land and then of their anguish as they buried Charles in that wilderness. They felt her desolation as she looked for Petrus to find him no more. They heard her urgency that others were needed to carry the Good News to Tibet. Who might answer that call? They did...

The FCMS appointed them 8-17-03 and they took up their lives and sailed with Dr. Susie from San Francisco 8-29-03 for China. Petrus had been determined to go to Lassa - Dr. Shelton felt the tug of that call and never wavered from it the rest of his life. *All my life I have heard of the strength, courage, and single-minded determination that led Shelton to Thibet and of how Mrs. Shelton went with him.*

Albert Leroy Shelton, born 6-9-1875, and Floria Flavia Beal, born 9-28-1871, lived in Kansas after marriage. Dr. and Mrs. Shelton both graduated from Kansas State Normal School and the Dr. from the Medical Department of Kentucky University. They had first been asked to go to Nanking, China but decided to go “to Thibet because the need is so much greater there; no doctor nearer than 700 miles.”¹⁴ From the rough pioneering of their early life going to western China was not much different from Kansas in the late 19th C. It was rough farming country and some people lived in sod huts not too different from the Thibetan homes, perhaps not even as well constructed. With primitive sanitary arrangements, wells or springs, hand tools and wood stoves, even cow chips for fuel.; adjustment to Thibet was not as hard as for later missionaries. Dr. Shelton had the best medical education of that day, but being a doctor was more than education; it was an inborn talent of sensitivity.

¹⁴ Pioneering in Tibet, Albert L. Shelton, NY: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1921.

Upon arrival in San Francisco, it was decided by the group that Dr. Shelton should be ordained so that the group would have a minister with them. Then they sailed via Honolulu and Japan to Shanghai and took the same route taken before with the last 650 miles or about 30 days of travel on mountain roads unfit for any vehicle, exceedingly rough and steep and one of the mountain passes was 16,000-17,000'. Finally 12 days overland with Mrs. Shelton in a sedan chair and the good Dr. and Dr. Susie by horseback. Their goods were carried on the backs of coolies. So, the earnest little band came to Ta-tien-lu, a meeting place for Chinese and Thibetan, from which tea and silks were packed for the long trek into Thibet and from where turquoise and silver came out. This is also where three caravan roads meet: the one going to China proper, the Northern Route to Lusa and Kumbum, and the Great Caravan route to Lassa (3-15-04).

The first important job for the Sheltons was to learn the language. Their teachers were Chinese scholars, an old and honored profession, but they had no idea how to teach foreigners other than the method used with Chinese children. Dr. Shelton became so perturbed that he finally took himself off to a Thibetan village and stayed for a month to force himself to speak no other than Thibetan. Then he wrote the FCMS asking that they send out an educational missionary and wife so as to deal with the language problem.

Dr. Shelton was a keen and passionate observer of the life around him. People became more than just colleagues and fellow Christians, more than a foreign people of strange customs, more than officials who needed to be appeased - he made them all friends. He enjoyed long discussions as he became more proficient in the language and had a wide range of interests that he enjoyed sharing freely. He enjoyed hunting and on his itinerating journeys became widely recognized with his mule, Abe, and his dogs, Spot and Jack, a hunter and a retriever. He knew no enemies and his medical and counseling skills were known up and down the countryside. He was especially a counselor to all the missionaries and everyone turned to him.

Mrs. Shelton chose as her missionary tasks the translation of materials for use in the church and school with the help of her Thibetan teacher. She translated hymns, textbooks, folk stories, etc.

Life in Ta-tien-lu was easier than it was later in Batang, being nearer to the sources of supplies. Cash and mail came through more regularly. With a larger center of population there were more and a greater variety of shops, yet still no bank. The missionaries eat native foods, such as the wheat ground into graham flour, yak and mutton with some quail and pheasants from hunting. Vegetables, such as can be grown in a climate with cold nights, were available. 1905 Annual

Report - Drs. Susie and Shelton describe to the Executive Committee of the FCMS the work of the past year: “Brethren:- Realizing the difficulties of a clear conception of a work at this distance we shall be as full and explicit as possible and as far as we are able ‘lend you our eyes’, that you may see our mistakes, failures and successes of the past, our hopes and aspirations for the future.”² (3-20-05). He describes the residences for living and working: a shop being fitted up for chapel, dispensary, and small school room. The chapel fitted for 40 had 66 crammed into it and others standing outside. So a room from the next shop was added for women who were reluctant to come unless they could sit separately. This next shop had quarters for Dr. Susie to live in. On the men’s side were small rooms to use for patients. A Mr. Yang from the CIM was hired at 15 taels a month as an evangelist.

Dr. Shelton opened a school of ten boys, including the Lee brothers, at the same time he opened his dispensary, 1-2-05. Dr. Susie had opened hers as soon as they arrived. She had also immediately organized a Bible class for women and begun itinerating in nearby villages.

The Lee brothers, Lee Gway-gwang and Lee Gway-yuin, 12 and 6 respectively, had been taken into the Shelton home. They were the sons of a lesser Chinese official and a Thibetan mother, no longer alive. Upon the death of their father, at his request, the Sheltons took them.

What the Sheltons gave the boys in love, security, and training was repaid many times over for they both became leaders in the Christian community. Many such orphans came into the care of the missionaries, including Dr. Susie, and later they made a great contribution. The education, moral strength, and faith that they received from the Sheltons served them well all their lives. Without being under the wings of these kindly people, if they managed to survive at all they would have been beggars, thieves, and prostitutes. The Lee brothers were the first and the best.

Meanwhile, Dr. Shelton immediately saw the value of itinerating. “Dr. Susie gave all the treasures of her energy, talent and experience to the establishment and development of the mission.” Her fame and that of Dr. Shelton “leaped over tableland and rivers, and traveled far on the Caravan Road to Lassa.”¹⁶ Patients came for both of them from afar, even from Inner Thibet.

Dr. Susie also began industrial classes for teaching women

² Monthly and Annual Reports: Individual Missionaries, TCM Secretary of Treasurer with Financial Estimates, and Correspondence of the Mission on Business.

and children skills to earn a living, and also training for midwives. Until Dr. Shelton had sufficient language she and Mr. Yang carried the church work. Meetings were held every night with 14 men and 9 women as inquirers. Many did come for private reasons such as help in lawsuits or private quarrels, but left when they discovered that only the Gospel was preached! The schoolboys especially seemed to understand the Gospel and what it means. Nine of these are under instruction.

Mrs. Shelton was very busy with their first daughter, Dorris Evangeline (dob 8-25-04) and then Dorothy Madelene (dob 5-27-08). Later, Dorris characterized herself as “Daddy’s little girl” because he took charge of her when her sister was born and she went everywhere with him. As she got older she continued to accompany him becoming quite adept at assisting him and being very interested in his work. In regard to their learning the language Dr. Shelton wrote “the children speak it just as naturally as the natives and learn it more readily than they do English, and more correctly.”¹⁷

Dr. Susie and John Moyes became engaged deciding to be married at the Canadian Consulate in Chentu. Letters arrived from the FCMS and the Ogdens announcing their appointment as educational missionaries and then their imminent arrival, so the Sheltons planned to go with Dr. Susie and John to meet the Ogdens.

Then unexpectedly John Moyes took sick with that dread disease, typhus, and Dr. Susie was beside herself with alarm and grief. Everyone despaired for his life! Dr. Susie nearly collapsed with anguish! Dr. Shelton stayed beside him trying whiskey as a heart stimulant. Finally he began to administer the whiskey directly into the heart muscle. He kept this up for several hours until finally John began to respond. Later John and Dr. Susie made the trip and were married 9-16-05. Mrs. Shelton and Dorris remained in Chentu while Dr. Shelton and Shao-yu went to Shanghai. They found the Ogdens waiting.

¹⁶ Loc cit., Shelton pp.

¹⁷ Quote: Papers in the Shelton Collection, Newark Museum, Newark, NJ. Unpublished.