

Who Were Willie & Rose Edwards

Willie and Rose Edwards

Irvinites

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Irvine's Right-Hand Man, Willie Edwards

Rose Harriet Lerch was born on April 11, 1888, in Janesville, Wisconsin. She first heard Workers preach in 1906 when she was 18 years old. Her parents and Methodist church friends thought she was crazy to believe such (**May 27, 1935**, to Berglinds, *TTT*). Rose probably professed in Willie Edwards' Meetings. She wrote that she first met Irvine at Meetings held in Chicago in 1907, and at his invitation, she entered the Work in 1907.

William (Willie) Edwards was born May 9, 1878, in Ballinamallard, Ireland, and came to America aboard the SS *Lauertain* when he was 24 (recorded occupation at immigration: shop assistant) on September 17, 1902. **He professed in 1904 in George Walker's tent Meeting in Philadelphia and went in the work shortly thereafter.** He wrote, "William Irvine took his stand under John McNeil. I took my stand under George Walker" (Oct. 18, 1937, to Fountains, *TTT*). Willie had four sisters: Margaret, Annie; Sarah who married Joe Kerr; and Elizabeth who married James Gordon, an ex-Worker who resided in Australia. James is referred to in the Bethel Mission Account of South Australia as "Jimmy Gordon." At least Sarah and Elizabeth and families remained loyal followers of William Irvine (Bethel Mission 1910, *TTT*). At least Sarah and Elizabeth remained loyal Irvinites.

Willie Edwards, the Senior Brother Worker in Nebraska, spearheaded the separation there in 1918-1919. At least four younger Brother Workers (two Simpsons and two Waldrons) aligned themselves with Irvine, along with some Friends, including about half the men in the large Baker family, and the Waldrons who owned the York, Nebraska convention. A number of families were divided in the Irvine schism. California and Denver, where a number of Irvine followers from Nebraska ended up, seem to have been the main centers for Irvine's followers.

On January 11, 1916, Willie and Rose Edwards were married in Great Falls, Montana, when he was 38 and she was 28. They began their life together in Montana. Their daughter Anna was born in 1916, their sons John in 1920 and Philip Irvine in 1927. After encountering opposition and/or disapproval from the Montana Friends and Workers, they moved to California. Willie and Rose Edwards had three children, two sons and a daughter, and were in the grocery business in Berkeley, California (W. Edwards Nov. 19, 1942, to Owens*).

"When Mr. Irvine heard in 1916 of Rose and I being united—what a letter he wrote—saying how glad he was to hear that we were married and gave us the first comfort we had ever gotten. Others had plowed on our backs and made long their furrows, but he gave us the comfort and consolation that could come from God only" (W. Edwards June 25, 1942, to Ira Baker*).

In April of 1919, Willie and Rose visited William Irvine in Los Angeles and heard his Omega Message for the first time (R. Edwards May 27, 1935, to Berglinds, *TTT*), and were excommunicated by Jack Carroll for believing in William Irvine's Omega Message (Edwards Dec. 20, 1942, to Caseys, *TTT*). This couple became some of Irvine's most ardent followers and witnesses.

Edwards would send a cover letter to those who distributed Irvine's letters, sometimes addressed to "Our Dear Friends in William Irvine." He often referred to Irvine as "Our Leader," stating, for instance, "surely it would make us tremble if we didn't have a Leader and Commander whose every word is our law and guide." The duty to write letters to other Omega followers was stressed. Their sincerity and heartiness were judged by the volume and depth of their correspondence, and by their amount of personal witnessing to outsiders. One Message Person referred to the two wisest men in the world as Solomon and William Irvine.

Irvine's followers believe he was the greatest prophet this world has ever known. Some even named their children after him. George Kerr, the son of Joe and Sarah Kerr named his daughter *Irvina Kerr*. Some boys were named John Irvine Barnes, William Irvine Loitz, Irvine Noble, William Irvine Hill, John Irvine West and Philip Irvine Edwards.

Willie Edwards' letters referred to Irvine using several reverent terms, and encouraged followers to give them far more than just a casual or cursory reading: "Nothing so important as to digest well all the late letters contain as they come from *the Throne*" (Nov. 18, 1942, to Mitchells*). "We were glad to get your letter and enclosed from *His 'Sent Angel'* which always is meat in due season" (Aug. 5, 1936, to Balls*). "We are enclosing a few of *the Prophet's* late letters" (Nov. 6, 1937, to Balls*). "For if we believe he [William Irvine] has the mind of God, then it is only right that we take his words a *voice from Heaven*" (Sept. 4, 1942, to Minnie Skerritt*).

Rose died from cancer on October 19, 1941. She was buried in Napa, California, and according to the practice of Omega followers, "There is no funeral at all, undertaker putting her [Rose Edwards] away without anyone there" (Alma Ackerson Oct. 20, 1941, to All in Vancouver*). Upon hearing of Rose's death, Irvine wrote Willie Edwards: "Just heard the good news. What a Wife, Mother, Saint and Servant you have had. Fought a good fight, finished her course, kept the faith" (Nov. 15, 1941, *TTT*). The following year on July 6, 1942, Willie married his typist, a much younger divorcee Omega follower, Madeline N. Kneeland, the daughter of Mrs. Flagg. Their marriage lasted 2-3 years (Nov. 4, 1945, to Madeline). Willie became a US citizen in 1941.

In 1943, Irvine believed the time had come for the unsealing of the Message to the world. He wanted six of his Followers to go out and witness the Omega Message in a manner similar to The Testimony Workers did early in the twentieth century. He wrote: "such great need in unsealing the words of the prophecy of Revelation, surely you have a wonderful opportunity and message if six of you can and will go forth as He [Jesus] and company did...My heart will be greatly rejoiced to hear that you have purposed to give Him a chance to lead you as He was led and led the disciples into giving deliverance to many by their apostolic ministry" (Sept. 26, 1943, to Edwards, *TTT*).

Irvine was not very explicit about the manner in which he wanted the witnessing to be done, and **there was a misunderstanding**. Some Followers, including W. Edwards, sold their homes and with their families, traveled about witnessing while living in house trailers. Bob Skerritt left his wife at home with the children while he went out witnessing with another Follower. When Irvine found out, he strenuously objected, and later retracted his instructions while he waited for more light on the matter. Much of Irvine's letters written in 1944 related to the details of this misunderstanding; see March 28, 1944 letter; and Willie Edwards' April 29, 1944 reply. Letters in 1945 refer to "what happened at **Easter time**" (April 1, 1945) and "that Scandal and evil speaking; which **came to a head at Easter**."

Irvine declared, "W. E. and Co. started out with car and trailer, with wife and even some children. Only Bob and Minnie [Skerritt] made any sign to know how it should be done" (March 3, 1944, to Nobles, *TTT* ; July 18, 1944, to Edwards, *TTT*). "So cars, trailers and wife and children with the Apostle seems like a comedy or joke when we read the new Testament; no matter what excuse we may seem to have...Bob Skerritt at least showed he had fear of His name in what he did in refusing Minnie, who was left as a guide to other wives" (March 28, 1944, to Edwards, *TTT*).

"Taking wives out to do apostolic work and leaving the children seems a very flagrant mistake, and a wife can in her home and around her home, do very valuable apostolic work, such as Minnie has been doing, which gave me great pleasure and joy. Taking a home on wheels and a car, seems also a dangerous provision" (Feb. 7, 1944, to Edwards, *TTT*).

"I remember Willie and Minnie [Skerritt] got the little I had in 1919, and have got all the help I could give by letter. But since they went to Montana, I have noticed injustice and scandal...and I saw it increase in place of benefiting by my warning and guidance. **At Easter**, when I got letters from many encouraged by Willie and Minnie, I saw it had come to the crisis" (June 18, 1945, to Skerritt, *TTT*).

Reportedly, Willie Edwards started writing and distributing his own letters, arranging marriages and divorces, and perhaps attempting to become the American leader of the Omega Message. When this came to William Irvine's attention, he wrote Edwards some scathing letters to cease what he was doing. He also notified others that Edwards no longer had Irvine's approval:

"Thanks for yours and many others which shows that Edwards and Co., have reached the end of their delusion as you can see in Rev. 11... You saw Percy and George, and how it ended; and now Willie, Minnie and Co. revealed in their unjust treatment of Bob [Skerritt] , and many others in scandalizing and persecuting" (June 12, 1945, to Fladungs, *TTT*).

In mid-1945, Irvine became so displeased with some actions of Willie Edwards that he cut him off—stopped writing to him. For the two remaining years of his life, Irvine began again writing letters to followers individually. The 1940 Census shows Willie, 61, with two of his children, Anna and John, living in Maricopa, Arizona. Nothing further is known about Willie's life or activities after the schism. Social Security Death index shows Willie's death to be December 15, 1973, aged 95, in Prescott, Arizona.

*Letter references with asterisks after date are not posted on Telling The Truth.

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