

Habenicht, Robert Hill (1866–1925)

SILVIA C. SCHOLTUS

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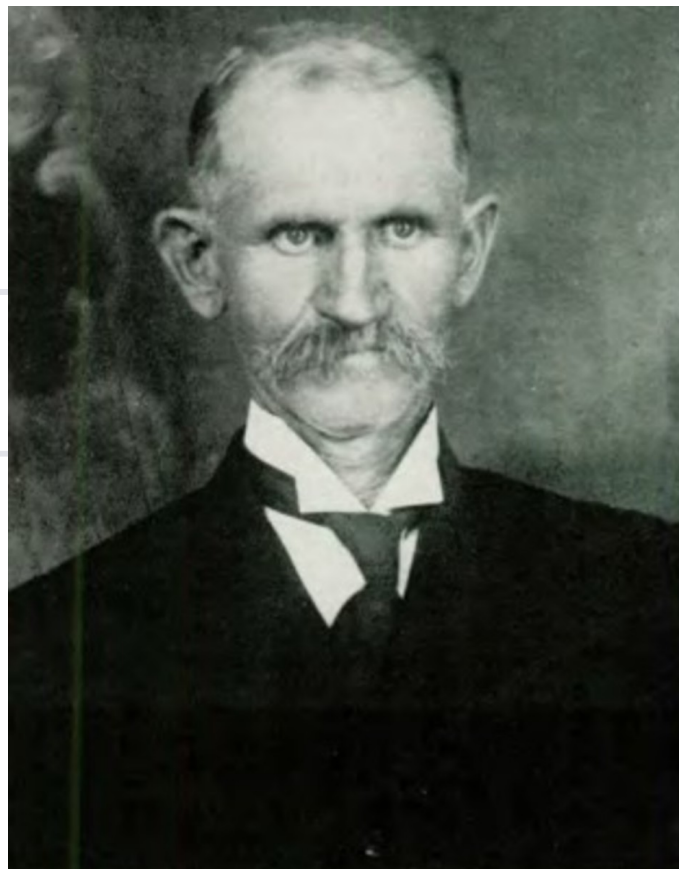
Robert Hill Habenicht was a North American missionary who worked in the United States and in South America. He was a pastor, physician, administrator, and pioneer of Adventist medical institutions.¹

Born on July 16, 1866, in Springville, near Indianola, Iowa, United States, he was the seventh of the 12 children of Christian and Elisabeth Habenicht. He graduated from his pastoral studies on June 16, 1891, and within a few months, after turning 25, married Adella Ida Allen, from Summer, Iowa on October 6, 1891, whom he met at the school where he studied in Battle Creek.²

Robert and Adella's family grew rapidly with the arrival of their children Judson Power (1892-1925), Roberta (1895-1899), Cleo Mae (1899-1989), Liria Florida (1901-1920), Robert Harvey (1905-1991), and Herald Ambrose (1906-1974).³ In September 1895, Robert began his studies in medicine at Iowa State University. He graduated with a degree in medicine on March 30, 1898. His wife Adella also took medical training courses.⁴ About three months later, on June 6, 1898, he was ordained to the pastoral ministry.⁵ Robert's medical knowledge, added to his dedication to the pastoral ministry, prepared him to connect with his patients in a holistic way, combining their physical and spiritual needs.

After his marriage he taught at Jamaica Academy, Iowa, and ministered in the neighboring churches. Shortly after the birth of his first son Judson, in May 1894, he moved with his family to minister in the Knoxville, Iowa area. During the summer months he dedicated himself to selling religious literature.

Habenicht was an excellent organizer and administrator of sanitariums. On January 20, 1899, he founded and started the Iowa Sanitarium in Clinton, Iowa. A month later, he moved to Des Moines, Iowa, where he started



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the Des Moines Sanitarium in February of that year. Simultaneously, he started another sanitarium in Colfax, Iowa, between January and October of that year.⁶ He became director of these sanitariums and was a member of Des Moines University.⁷

The experience gained by Robert Habenicht enabled him to meet the demands that were being presented in the growing Seventh-day Adventist Church in South America. Most of his active service as a missionary was in Argentina, particularly in the province of Entre Ríos, and sporadically in Paraguay and Brazil.

Robert spent a month studying Spanish in Buenos Aires,⁸ and in early 1902 he moved to the Entre Ríos area where he was able to work among Russian-German colonists. He initially established a clinic in the town of Crespo. Robert had to revalidate his degree in order to work as a physician.⁹

Habenicht attended numerous patients in his clinic and taught at the Diamante School, an Adventist educational institution 17 km from Crespo, the current River Plate Adventist University in Libertador San Martín, Entre Ríos. In 1903 he moved with his family to the Camarero area.¹⁰ During that year, he traveled with the leading Adventist church pastor in Argentina organizing several new congregations. In 1904 he was elected vice president of the River Plate Conference.¹¹

His knowledge in the printing area obtained while studying at Battle Creek College, Michigan, United States, allowed him to collaborate with the beginnings of a printing press at the Diamante School.¹²

As an administrator, he was present when the South American Mission became the South American Union Conference in 1906. His responsibilities required him to travel to various provinces in Argentina.¹³

In 1907, in addition to his activities as a physician and educator, he was asked to serve as the Diamante School director. A room in his home served as an office and the dining room was used to perform surgical interventions on several occasions.¹⁴ That is why, in that same year, it was voted to begin construction of a sanitarium under his direction that was near the educational institution.¹⁵

His teaching and medical skills led him to start several courses in South America to prepare missionaries to be pastors and nurses. His task as administrator gave impulse to different ventures in these lands that left their mark on those latitudes.

Subsequently, other doctors came to collaborate with Habenicht in the care and administration of the sanitarium. His intense work led to health problems. In 1922 he traveled to the United States to visit his family and recover. In 1923, although he returned to Argentina and continued with his activities, his health problems increased. Robert made the decision to return to his country.¹⁶ While in the United States, Robert initiated two sanitariums and worked as an evangelist.¹⁷

In 1925, during a trip to Brazil to visit his daughter Cleo and family, his health deteriorated and he died in that country, on September 21, of heart failure at the age of 59.¹⁸ He was buried in São Paulo, in Araçá cemetery.¹⁹

Robert Habenicht left a legacy by creating, supporting, and promoting the construction of several sanitariums.

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NOTES

1. A more detailed description of the life of Robert Habenicht can be found at: Silvia Scholtus, "Robert H. Habenicht," en *Misioneros fundacionales del adventismo Sudamericano* [Founding missionaries of South American Adventism], Daniel Plenc, Silvia Scholtus, Eugenio Di Dionisio, Sergio Becerra, 3rd ed. (Libertador San Martín, Entre Ríos: Editorial River Plate Adventist University, 2016), 59-84. See also: Daniel Oscar Plenc, *Misioneros en Sudamérica: Pioneros del Adventismo en Latinoamérica* [Missionaries in South America: Pioneers of Adventism in Latin America], 2nd ed. (Buenos Aires: South American Spanish Publishing House, 2008), 42-52.
2. Mercedes Habenicht Dyer, *Habenicht Family Heritage*, vol. 2 (Berrien Springs, Michigan: s.e., 2004), a copy is in the library of White Research Center, River Plate Adventist University, Entre Ríos, Argentina.
3. Some of these data have been kindly provided by family descendants of Robert Habenicht. Those who wish to request a particular reference can be directed to Norman Fontana (normanfontana@hotmail.com) and Rebecca Knoll (acellist@hotmail.com).
4. Habenicht Dyer, *Habenicht Family Heritage*.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.

9. Floyd Greenleaf, *The Seventh-day Adventist Church in Latin America and the Caribbean*, 2 vols. (Berrien Springs, Michigan: Andrews University Press, 1992), 1:60-61; Habenicht Dyer, *Habenicht Family Heritage*; R. H. Habenicht, "The Medical Work in Argentina," *ARH*, July 8, 1902, 14; R. H. Habenicht, "Argentina, South America," *ARH*, December 6, 1906, 15; "Notas editoriales" [Editorial notes], *La Revista Adventista* [Adventist Review] 6, n. 6, June 1906, 12; N. Z. Town, "Un nuevo sanatorio" [A new sanitarium], *La Revista Adventista* [Adventist Review] 7, n. 12, December 1907, 5.
10. Habenicht Dyer, *Habenicht Family Heritage*.
11. N. Z. Town, "República Argentina," *La Revista Adventista* [Adventist Review] 4, n. 7, July 1904, 6; N. Z. Town, "Territory of Misiones," *ARH*, September 10 September, 1903, 17; John McCarthy, "Notes from the Argentine Republic," *ARH* 80, n° 44, November 5, 1903, 17; Habenicht Dyer, *Habenicht Family Heritage*; Cecilia D. de Kalbermatter, "Los comienzos de la obra en Paraguay" [The beginning of the work in Paraguay], *Revista Adventista* [Adventist Review] 58, n. 8, August 1958, 13; N. Z. Town, "La Conferencia Anual en la República Argentina" [The Annual Conference in the Argentine Republic], *La Revista Adventista* [Adventist Review] 4, n. 11, November 1904, 4; John McCarthy, "Eco de Misiones" [Echo of Missions], *Suplemento de La Revista Adventista* [Adventist Review Supplement], February 1905, 3-4.
12. "Notas del Plata" [Plate Notes], *La Revista Adventista* [Adventist Review] 5, n. 10, October 1905, 4.
13. R. H. Habenicht, "En el campo otra vez" [In the field again], *La Revista Adventista* [Adventist Review] 6, n. 11, November 1906, 5; N. Z. Town, "Empedrado, Bella Vista y el Chaco" [Empedrado, Bella Vista and the Chaco], *La Revista Adventista* [Adventist Review] 8, n. 2, February 1908, 13.
14. Greenleaf, *The Seventh-day Adventist Church in Latin America and the Caribbean*, 1:97-98; R. H. Habenicht, "A new medical missionary's letter," *ARH* 85, n. 48, November 26, 1908, 18-19; y "How a Sanitarium grew up on the plains," *ARH* 36, n. 44, November 4, 1909, 19; N. Z. Town, "De Rosario a Camarero" [From Rosario to Camarero], 7.
15. N. Z. Town, "El nuevo sanatorio" [The new sanitarium], *La Revista Adventista* [Adventist Review] 8, n. 4, April 1908, 37; Arturo Fulton, "Comité de los intereses platenses" [Committee of Plate interests], *La Revista Adventista* [Adventist Review] 8, n. 4, April 1908, 37-38.
16. Habenicht Dyer, *Habenicht Family Heritage*; Carlos Thompson, "La sesión de la Unión Austral" [The session of the Southern Union], *La Revista Adventista* [Adventist Review] 23, n. 4, 12 February 1923, 6.
17. Habenicht Dyer, *Habenicht Family Heritage*.
18. Ibid.
19. Grave 756, general block 87 (Ibid.). See also Robert Hill Habenicht's necrology, November 19, 1925, *Sumner Gazet* (cited in Habenicht Dyer, *Habenicht Family Heritage*, vol. II) and the obituary notes of *La Revista Adventista* [Adventist Review] 25, n. 19, September 28, 1925, 24.

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