

# Sheld-Ritchie, Iner (1885–1949)

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Iner Sheld-Ritchie was a physician and medical missionary whose initiatives did much to establish Adventist public health and medical work in Mexico.



Iner Sheld-Ritchie, M.D.

Photo courtesy of Richard A. Schaefer.

## Early Life

Iner Sheld was born on October 6, 1885, in Warberg, Sweden, to Leander and Eva Sheld. His family emigrated to the United States when Iner was three years old and settled in California. Just three years later, his mother died.<sup>1</sup> Witnessing a country doctor devote long hours to a heroic albeit unsuccessful effort to save his mother's life made a profound and lasting impression on the six-year-old boy. The experience, he later said, implanted within him "a growing desire as I grew older to join the ranks of the men whom he represented—men whose lives are dedicated to the unselfish service . . . of the medical ministry to suffering humanity."<sup>2</sup>

Leander Sheld remarried within a year but his new wife was unwilling to raise his sons. Iner and his two brothers were placed in a Los Angeles orphanage. The Sheld brothers later became farm hands and cowboys near Chino, California, doing ranch chores and sleeping in a barn hayloft. As a teen, Iner traveled and experienced much—working as a lumberjack and breaking wild horses, for example.<sup>3</sup> At 17 he was self-sufficient, working on the Fuller Ranch near Corona, California, and tending his own bees, but came to realize the need to do something about his lack of formal education. A Corona school principal allowed Iner to take books home and

be tested on them rather than sit in a schoolroom of small children, and in that way he advanced from the third grade to finishing the eighth grade in one year. He later earned a high school diploma in a similar manner.<sup>4</sup>

## Education, Conversion, and Marriage

For his bee business, Iner bought supplies from William S. and Lula Ritchie, an Adventist couple in Corona who held Sabbath services in their home for as many as 50 worshipers. Through their influence, Iner attended evangelistic meetings in 1904 and eventually was baptized into the Seventh-day Adventist Church.<sup>5</sup> The Ritchies came to regard him as a son and invited him to adopt the Ritchie name. At 23, he was too old to be legally adopted, but on 09, he formally announced that his name was Iner Sheld-Ritchie and the Ritchies introduced him as their newly adopted son.<sup>6</sup>

With financial support from the Ritchies, Iner entered Pacific College of Osteopathy in Los Angeles in 1907. In the fall of 1908, he transferred to the Loma Linda College of Evangelists. The next year when the institution officially started its school of medicine and changed its name to College of Medical Evangelists (CME), Iner enrolled in its first class. On 14, a few months before finishing medical school, Iner married the Ritchies' adopted daughter, Inelda Ruth. Throughout her life, friends and family knew her as a conscientious, devoted, and self-sacrificing woman. The couple eventually had four children: Iner William, Anna Virginia, Inelda May, and Robert Lorraine.<sup>7</sup>

## A Physician for All the People

Following graduation in 1915, Iner Sheld-Ritchie, MD, practiced medicine in Burbank, California, for a year. Even though he signed legal documents as "Sheld-Ritchie," his patients always knew him as "Dr. Ritchie." And because the hyphenated name sounded pretentious, his family always used the name Ritchie. In 1916, he and his family moved back to Arlington, California, where he joined in a medical practice with E. H. Wood, MD, the man who had supervised his internship.

Dr. Ritchie became known for treating all patients alike. In those days, some Los Angeles physicians treated their white patients first while everyone else waited. Thus, carloads of Chinese would come to Arlington from Los Angeles for Iner to serve them. During the influenza epidemic of 1918, Dr. Ritchie earned the respect and gratitude of the people of Arlington and Riverside for his untiring vigilance that helped stem the spread of the virus in that area. Although hundreds of patients in Riverside County succumbed, none of Dr. Ritchie's patients died.<sup>8</sup>

## CME and Calexico

In 1920, Dr. Ritchie joined the faculty as an instructor of anatomy.<sup>9</sup> That same year, his adoptive parents sold their Corona home and bought Snug Harbor, the 24-room Loma Linda mansion designed and built in 1895 by

Colonel J. T. Ritchie, William S. Ritchie's uncle. The elder Ritchies gave Iner and Inelda a nearby lot on Prospect Avenue where they built a small home and lived for seven years.<sup>10</sup>

After teaching at CME for six years, Dr. Ritchie opened a practice in Calexico, California, near the Mexican border in 1926. The practice thrived, and Ritchie established the city's first hospital, located just three blocks from the border.<sup>11</sup>

His work in Calexico opened doors of service to the needy of Mexico, facilitated by connections he developed with officials in the Mexican state of Baja California, who called him over the border to care for them and their families. In one such instance, Dr. Ritchie, using hydrotherapy techniques he learned at CME, succeeded where other physicians had failed at calming the baby daughter of the governor of Baja California, Abelardo Rodrigues. Ritchie declined the fine whiskey and Havana cigars that Rodrigues offered as a gesture of thanks but accepted the governor's help in circumventing some local political challenges in order to start a home nursing education program.<sup>12</sup> It was also through his connections with Rodrigues, who later became president of Mexico (1932-1934), that Dr. Ritchie became one of the few American physicians to be granted a license to practice medicine in Mexico.<sup>13</sup>

## Medical Missionary Initiatives in Mexico

In 1934, Dr. Ritchie, in response to a call from the Mexican Union Mission Committee, left his successful and growing family practice in Calexico to serve at the church-owned Tacubaya Clinic in Mexico City.<sup>14</sup> He soon traveled into the tropical areas of southern Mexico, toward the Guatemalan border, to treat the native population. Braving the peril of accident and sickness, he sometimes traveled by horseback, boat, and dugout canoe to reach indigenous peoples who had no other access to medical care. He not only addressed their acute medical needs, but also attempted to teach them techniques of sanitation and preventive medicine—how to avoid sickness. On one trip in 1934 he took a photographer along to document the needs of the people and to solicit government support.<sup>15</sup> Dr. Ritchie also brought Adventist colporteurs and workers from all over Mexico to Mexico City for an intensive course in public health. He arranged for graduates to be awarded government public health worker certificates which made them eligible to receive free supplies to vaccinate and immunize the people in their villages.<sup>16</sup>

In the meantime, by 1935, he had taught almost 40 "workers" to care for the sick, some of whom could expand his work in the jungles of southern Mexico. In a letter to his adoptive mother in August 1935, Iner acknowledged that he felt hindered having too many "irons in the fire." Through competent and compassionate service he envisioned building lasting friendships with the leaders of Mexico that eventually would open every state to graduates of . But, in 1936, a heart attack cut short Dr. Ritchie's work in Mexico City. His family returned to Loma Linda while he recuperated that spring and summer at Dr. T. Gordon Reynolds' hospital and school of nursing in the northern state of Sonora. He then returned to Riverside and established a family practice in his home on

Seventh Street. Later he built the Monterrey Medical Clinic on what is now Brockton Avenue.<sup>17</sup>

Ritchie also began making regular excursions back into Mexico, conducting medical clinics. In 1947 he organized Liga Mexico-Pan-Americana Medico Educational, a non-profit corporation that offered opportunities of service to physicians, nurses, public health workers, and health educators. "Liga," as it became known, established clinics in the Mexican states of Sonora, Sinaloa, and Baja.

Dr. Ritchie also had a leading role in establishing an Adventist hospital that opened in 1947 in Montemorelos, Nuevo Leon, on land donated by the governor of the state. The major financial backer was cereal magnate W. K. Kellogg, a friend of Ritchie's, along with Glendale Sanitarium and Hospital. A School of Nursing opened at the Montemorelos Hospital in 1948 and the hospital became part of the medical school opened at Montemorelos University in 1974.<sup>18</sup>

## Legacy

Iner Sheld-Ritchie suffered a fatal heart attack on 49, at age 64.<sup>19</sup> But his influence continues, most notably through the medical school at Montemorelos and the ongoing work of Liga International. His son, Dr. Iner William Ritchie, referred to by his adoptive grandmother as "Iner William," became a professor at Loma Linda University and continued his father's medical missionary program in Mexico by leading Liga.<sup>20</sup>

In 1950, Iner William purchased Snug Harbor to keep it in the family. "The Ritchie Mansion," as it is known today, is located on Ritchie Circle in Loma Linda, and is now well over 100 years old. It was purchased in 1995 by Loma Linda University Medical Center and, after being refurbished, has become an inn, a home away from home, for outpatients of the James M. Slater, MD, Proton Treatment and Research Center.

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## NOTES

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2. Christina Cicchetti, "El Doctór," *Journal of the Riverside Historical Society*, No. 2 (1998), 3.
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5. Cicchetti, "El Doctór," 2.
6. *Ibid.*, 2-3.
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8. "Iner Sheld-Ritchie, October 6, 1885-October 24, 1949," 5.
9. Clarence E. Nelson, "Iner Ritchie Dies," *Journal of the Alumni Association, School of Medicine, College of Medical Evangelists*, January 1950, 16.
10. "Iner Sheld-Ritchie, October 6, 1885-October 24, 1949," 5; Keld Reynolds, "A Tale of Two Cities," *Sunshine Citrus and Science* (1985), 34-35.
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14. "Iner Sheld-Ritchie, October 6, 1885-October 24, 1949," 9; Nelson, "Iner Ritchie Dies," 16.
15. Cicchetti, "El Doctór," 6.
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17. *Ibid.*, 10; Cicchetti, 1998, "El Doctór," 7.
18. "Iner Sheld-Ritchie, October 6, 1885-October 24, 1949," 12; Nelson, "Iner Ritchie Dies," 16; "In Memoriam: Iner Sheld Ritchie," 4; *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. edition (1996), s.v. "Montemorelos University Hospital."
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