

# Lillian Trasher (1887-1961)

by

Kathleen Hardcastle

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Lillian Trasher can easily be categorized as one of the best known missionaries of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Although it was not her goal to be a role model for women in ministry, her life has been an inspiration to many other women who have felt called to full time service.

Lillian Trasher was born in Jacksonville, Florida on September 27, 1887. Her family was Roman Catholic, but in her teens, Lillian chose to make a personal commitment to Christ and received the infilling of the Holy Spirit.<sup>1</sup> At the age of 17, while on a trip to Atlanta to apply for a job, Lillian met Miss Mattie Perry who ran the Faith Orphanage in Marion, North Carolina. Miss Perry told Lillian about the orphanage and how they lived by faith, believing each day that God would supply all of their needs. By the end of their brief meeting, Miss Perry invited Lillian to come to North Carolina and work with her. When the

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<sup>1</sup>"Lillian Trasher," AllExperts. [http://en.allexperts.com/e/l/li/lillian\\_trasher.htm](http://en.allexperts.com/e/l/li/lillian_trasher.htm) (accessed October 18, 2009).

job interview in Atlanta did not go as planned, Lillian decided to take Miss Perry up on her offer and began her journey of ministry that would last over 50 years.

The Faith Orphanage was a great training ground for Lillian. Not only did she learn necessary skills such as cooking, sewing and caring for children, she also learned about the administration of a large home and what it meant to live by faith. For five years, Lillian worked off and on at the orphanage while also attending Bible School, pastoring a church in Dahlonga, Georgia and traveling as an evangelist.<sup>2</sup>

In 1910, Lillian became engaged to a young minister named Tom Jordan. Just ten days before the wedding, she attended an evangelistic meeting where she heard a missionary from India and believed that God was directing her to full time missions in Africa. Lillian answered the call by breaking her engagement and traveling to a missionary conference in Pittsburgh. While on that trip, she met G.S. Brelsford, a Pentecostal missionary working with a Presbyterian group in Assiout, Egypt. Even though she had no money and no organizational backing, Lillian accepted his offer to join his mission team in Egypt. Lillian's family was not in favor of her move, but when it was clear that she was determined to go, her sister, Jennie, announced that she would travel with Lillian to help her get settled. Jennie remained with Lillian in Egypt for much of her ministry<sup>3</sup>.

The story is told that in their ship cabin, before sailing, "somebody in their party said, 'Why don't you open your Bible and read the first verse that you light upon?' Lillian smiled, but closed her eyes, and opened her Bible. The first verse she saw was one that she had never noticed before," Acts 7:34. "I have seen the affliction of my people which is in Egypt, and I have heard their groaning, and am come down to deliver them. And now come,

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<sup>2</sup>Gary B. McGee, *People of the Spirit* (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 2004), 166.

<sup>3</sup>Benge, 43-48.

I will send thee to Egypt.” Lillian wrote, “In this unmistakable way God set His final seal on my call.”<sup>4</sup>

Assiout was the fourth largest city in Egypt, behind Cairo and the lower Egyptian towns of Alexandria and Tanta. It was the capital of Upper Egypt and had the largest population of Copts (the pre-Arab Egyptians and members of the Coptic Christian church) in the country. The Presbyterians had been evangelizing in Assiout since 1954 and had success within the Coptic community.<sup>5</sup>

Three months after Lillian’s arrival in Egypt, an event occurred that would change her life forever. She accompanied a neighbor to the home of a dying woman. Although she was unable to help the woman, she agreed to care for the woman’s newborn baby who was also very sick. Lillian and Jennie took the baby back to the missionary station and began nursing her back to life. The crying infant was too much of a disruption for the other missionaries, however, and so Lillian was asked to give the baby back to the family. This is when Lillian made the decision to leave the mission compound and rent a house to begin the ministry of caring for children in Assiout.<sup>6</sup>

At first, the local people suspected that these American women might be planning on taking the children to America as slaves. There were those in the community who had personal memories of when Assiout had been a major slave depot.<sup>7</sup> As the sisters continued to work in the community, they dispelled the fears of their neighbors and began adding to the children in their home.

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<sup>4</sup>Beth Prim Howell, *Lady on a Donkey* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Company, Inc., 1960), 59.

<sup>5</sup>Hassan, Fayza, “Liberty Blues,” Al-Ahram Weekly On-line, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2000/475/spec1.htm> (accessed October 19, 2009).

<sup>6</sup>Howell, 76.

<sup>7</sup>Jerome Beatty, *Nile Mother: The Story of Lillian Trasher* (Springfield, MO: General Council of the Assemblies of God, 1939), 12.

Lillian and Jennie had no formal means of support and were not backed by any missionary agency. They relied on the local community, tourists and donations from individuals in the United States who were kept informed about the ministry through the mail. Lillian had a donkey that she would ride out into the countryside asking for donations. Sometimes she would be gone for several days at a time. The local farmers would give her food and supplies to help her feed and care for the children in the orphanage. Eventually, she even became known as the “lady on a donkey.”<sup>8</sup>

When the orphanage had grown to about 50 children, Lillian decided to move from the house in town to the other side of the river where the children could have more space. The children joined in to make the bricks needed to build the new house. As was always the case, there was not enough money to purchase the land or build a house. Lillian’s commitment to living by faith meant that she walked forward even when she did not know where her help would come from. This time, a wealthy Coptic family sold her the land at a lower price and a local official helped by giving her almost the entire \$250 that she needed.<sup>9</sup>

As the orphanage was continuing to expand, the surrounding area was becoming more and more politically unstable. World War I added tensions to an already unhappy population in Egypt. The Copts and the Muslims believed that they were ready to rule their own country. The British were not willing to loosen their control. It was a dangerous time in the country, especially for foreign missionaries. Many of the missionaries left their mission stations at this time, but Lillian remained with her children. During the war, the

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<sup>8</sup>Howell, 104.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 99.

orphanage doubled in size to over 100 children and new rooms were added to the existing buildings to house the growing family.<sup>10</sup>

As the war was ending, once again the nationals expected to have a say in the fate of their country. The British, however, continued to hold tight reigns and unilaterally made all the decisions at the Paris talks. This time, the Egyptians did not accept being blocked from the process. Riots broke out and the British military were called in to suppress the mobs. Lillian and the children were forced to hide in a kiln next door to the orphanage one night as they heard the bullets flying outside. Nearby houses were looted and burned, but the orphanage was kept safe.<sup>11</sup>

In 1919, the British consulate required all foreigners to leave the region as they attempted to restore order. Lillian left by boat for Cairo and decided that she might as well use the time to return to the United States. She had been in Egypt for seven years. It was on this trip that she met with the leadership of the newly formed Assemblies of God. Recognizing that this was a missions-minded group, she officially joined the organization. While in the states, she traveled and spoke, raising support for the orphanage in Assiout.<sup>12</sup>

By 1923 Lillian had three hundred orphans and widows in her care. In 1926, Lillian set up a charitable trust into which she put the Assiout Orphanage and all of the lands and buildings. This official organization stated that she could never sell the lands and that she would run the orphanage until her death. She set up a committee to witness the trust. Under the terms of the charitable trust the orphanage was “as a home for the training and education of poor orphans, of any religion and of any denomination.” Lillian said, “I take

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 141.

<sup>11</sup>Janet & Geoff Bengé, *Lillian Trasher: The Greatest Wonder in Egypt* (Seattle, WA: YWAM, 2004), 11.

<sup>12</sup>Howell, 150.

into my orphanage Mohammedans, Syrians, Catholics – anyone. My work is not denominational, although I myself am Pentecostal.” The trust stipulated that the Muslim children were to be trained in Islam and Christian children were “to be instructed in the teachings of the Assemblies of God.”<sup>13</sup> Muslim children were a minority in the orphanage, although it was often difficult to know because abandoned children had no family identity.

Many of the orphans taken into the home were not actually fully orphaned. If a mother died at birth and the father felt unable to care for the child, he might ask the orphanage to take his baby. Sometimes, children were abandoned due to a deformity or illegitimate birth or because the child was a female. Children in the orphanage may have actually had other family members living in the area who were either unable or unwilling to take the child into their own homes. At one point, the father of Lillian’s original baby girl came to the orphanage and claimed his now healthy seven year old. It broke Lillian’s heart to see the girl leave and it was even more difficult when she learned later that the girl had died from illness.<sup>14</sup> After this, Lillian created some basic rules for admission to the orphanage that required relatives “to sign a paper that they give the children to us until they are eighteen years old,” at which point they would have reached maturity.<sup>15</sup> The orphanage was a community and family for the children.

Of course, Lillian’s desire when she came to Egypt was to see people come to the saving knowledge of Jesus. After many years, she began to see the results of her love and compassion as many of the children entered into their own prayer and worship. In 1927, Lillian wrote a letter describing the move of the Holy Spirit in the orphanage.

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<sup>13</sup>Beth Baron, *Revival on the Nile: “Mama” Trasher and the Assiout Orphanage*, (Oxford: City University of New York, 2006), 19.

<sup>14</sup>Howell, 126.

<sup>15</sup>Lester Sumrall, *Lillian Trasher: Nile Mother* (Springfield, MO: 1951), 22.

Today I witnessed the greatest revival I have ever seen in my life. Three days ago we started a revival meeting among the children. The Spirit was with us from the very first meeting, dozens getting saved and dozens seeking the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

This afternoon I thought the children had better not have a night meeting; they had been praying and crying for hours, so I said that everyone was to go to bed early. I went to my room early also, but soon I heard such a noise coming from all sides that I sent a girl to see if a funeral was passing by. She returned and said it was the children praying everywhere. I went first to the widows' and blind girls' department and found they were crying and praying. I went to the big girls' room; they were all on their faces crying to God or shouting.

But the most wonderful sight I ever saw in my life was when I followed the noise up to the housetop. There were dozens and dozens of little girls shouting, crying, talking in tongues, rejoicing, preaching, singing – well, just everything you can think of – praising God! Several of the children saw visions. I have no idea how many have been baptized in the Holy Spirit. Eternity alone will tell of these results.<sup>16</sup>

By 1933, the entire world was in the grip of the Great Depression. In Egypt, tensions were increased as the country was experiencing a more nationalistic mood. The Egyptians were beginning to question whether they should allow outside missionaries to proselytize in their country. According to the trust that Lillian had set up, Muslim children were to be educated in the Islam faith. After an investigation, the authorities determined that the Muslim children in the orphanage were not being taught Islam. They came to the orphanage and removed about 70 children identified as Muslim. After this time, the orphanage was only allowed to take in Coptic or Christian orphans and widows.<sup>17</sup>

By 1939, there were about 700 living at the orphanage. The widows had become an important part of the overall running of the home. They paid for their room and board by helping to cook and clean and care for the children. Lillian could not have run the orphanage without their help. Along with basic school work, the boys were taught skills

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<sup>16</sup> Lillian Trasher, *Letters from Lillian* (Springfield, MO: 1983) 17-18.

<sup>17</sup> Bengé, 144-148.

like carpentry and the girls were taught to cook and sew. Boys who showed an aptitude could continue on to college. Many of the girls married but some stayed single and remained at the orphanage, helping to care for the children.<sup>18</sup>

During World War II, again most of the missionaries left the country. Lillian remained at the orphanage. The war caused extreme shortages. An amazing miracle occurred right at this time. The American Ambassador, Alexander Kirk, summoned Lillian to Cairo. When she arrived at his house he was extremely excited to give her the news. Because Greece had just fallen to the Germans, a Red Cross ship named the *Kassandra Louloudis*, carrying a load of relief supplies destined for Greece was ordered to dump her supplies and return home. A young Scottish soldier on board the ship knew of the Lillian Trasher Orphanage and convinced the captain to unload the supplies in Alexandria. In a warehouse waiting for Lillian were supplies including “two thousand six hundred dresses. Nineteen hundred handmade sweaters. One thousand nine hundred pairs of boys’ pants. Three thousand eight hundred blankets. Eleven hundred towels. Seven hundred kegs of powdered milk. One thousand two hundred sacks of rice . . .”<sup>19</sup> Lillian’s prayers had been answered again.

In 1952, the British backed government fell and a new era of military rule was ushered into the country. Once again it was not safe for foreign missionaries. Once again, Lillian remained at her beloved orphanage. The country was transitioning under the newly elected president, Gamal Abdel Nasser.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Trasher, 121.

<sup>19</sup>Benge, 168.

<sup>20</sup>“History of Modern Egypt,” Wikipedia. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_modern\\_Egypt](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_modern_Egypt) (accessed October 18, 2009).

In 1956, another crisis developed when Nasser declared the Suez Canal to be Egyptian property. In October of that year, Israeli forces invaded the Sinai Peninsula and Britain and France landed troops in Egypt to take back the Suez Canal. It appeared that a new war was about to break out as Nasser sank 40 ships in the canal to block it. Thankfully, the United Nations was able to pressure a cease fire and all of the foreign troops finally withdrew. The Suez Canal was now under Egyptian control and the country was being run by Egyptians.<sup>21</sup>

The orphanage continued to gain the respect and appreciation of the community and even of President Nasser. In 1959, a donated car arrived from the United States for the orphanage. Its delivery was being held up in Cairo due to customs issues. President Nasser personally intervened on behalf of the orphanage and wrote a note to Lillian: "I would like to tell you that your work for the orphans is very much appreciated by everyone in this country. I wish you continued success in your philanthropic endeavour." <sup>22</sup>

Lillian's entire ministry life was one of faith. She never had more than a few weeks worth of money and supplies available to support the hundreds of children that she cared for. Throughout her ministry, she never lost her faith and God always supplied her needs. In October of 1956, she wrote,

Last week a visitor, hearing that we had just opened a new school for the older boys (who were too many) said to me: "But that will cost you an awful lot of money to run such a large school! Books, teachers . . . How much will it cost you?" I said, "Why, I don't know. But there are over 100 boys and we must have the school." He said, "But do you mean to say you have already started the school and have not counted the cost of running it?" "Why, yes," I

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Hassan, Fayza, "Liberty Blues," Al-Ahram Weekly On-line, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2000/475/spec1.htm> (accessed October 19, 2009).

said, “we never count the cost; we only look for the need. Then we go ahead and do it. God meets the needs as we go along . . . Counting the cost way just isn’t the way we run this Orphanage. It just has to be God!”<sup>23</sup>

Lillian Trasher passed away in 1961. She was in Egypt and had her sister, Jennie, by her side. At the time of her death, the Lillian Trasher Orphanage had grown to over 1,200 children. The orphanage had expanded to 13 buildings, including a church, a clinic and a primary school. "Mama" Lillian is buried in a simple Egyptian tomb several miles outside the city of Assiout.

“One day, not long before she was hospitalized, a news reporter had asked Lillian, ‘Miss Trasher, what is the secret of your missionary success? What is the greatest thing you ever did?’

‘There isn’t any secret,’ Lillian answered quickly. ‘I just stayed! I did not quit. I stayed with the work God gave me to do.’”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>Howell, 215.

<sup>24</sup>Benge,189.

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