

GRABER (*Archie*), Missionary (Williams County, Ohio, 06.02.1901 – Fulton County, Ohio, 31.08.1997). Son of Peter and Barbara Graber.

Archie Graber grew up on a farm. After eight years in a one-room country school he took odd jobs: as deck hand on a Great Lakes ore steamer, as carpenter, as a metal worker, as a western ranch hand. At age 24 he chauffeured a spinster university professor to her post on the West Coast. In their conversations she persuaded him to continue his studies. While in high school he majored in art and got involved with a group of Christian students who challenged him to consider a life of Christian service. He committed his life to full-time ministry at a Bible conference in Winona Lake, Indiana. A week later he enrolled at Moody Bible Institute in Chicago where he earned tuition working in the school's carpenter shop. During his three years at Moody he met his future wife, Evelyn Oyer, and together they accepted a call to serve in Africa with the Congo Inland Mission (CIM), later the Africa Inter-Mennonite Mission (AIMM).

Their first assignment was at Djoko Punda (renamed Charlesville by the Belgians), located just below Wissmann Falls, the head of navigation on the Kasai River. The first CIM missionaries had come to the western part of Kasai province in 1912 upon recommendation of the American Presbyterian Congo Mission (APCM) which had started work in central Congo twenty years earlier and welcomed this Mennonite mission to an area the APCM had been unable to serve. By the time the Grabers arrived in June 1930 Djoko Punda was a well-established mission station with primary schools, a printing press, a large dispensary, and hundreds attending Sunday morning services.

Though the station was named after the Bakuba chief Djoko Punda the local population was a mixture mainly of Bena Lulua and Baluba with Tshiluba the common language. Archie learned the language on the run. He was immediately assigned to head construction crews which meant learning first to burn brick and cut lumber. His art talents helped him design schools and churches with graceful arches and bell towers. And he loved village evangelism. Together with an African pastor he would spend weeks touring the villages and encouraging catechists and teachers. Daily work with workmen and pastors soon made him proficient in Tshiluba. He never had much training in French but spoke it well enough to communicate with Belgian administrators, traders and company officials. Portuguese traders supplied him with nails and hardware for his construction projects.

Djoko Punda station enjoyed the musical talents of his wife. She soon had choirs of men and ensembles of

women singing Tshiluba songs to western Gospel tunes, enlivened by drums and calabash. The enthusiasm of the community resulted in a massive campaign to redesign and enlarge the station church. Much of the money for the project came from the Africans themselves through special efforts assigned to clubs and age-groups. When the eighteen-month project was completed in 1939 the celebrations confirmed Archie's dreams and life-long leitmotif: a people can do almost anything if they work together as a community. Together with adherents in villages in the surrounding area Djoko Punda station had over five thousand church members by the end of 1945. His emphasis on village evangelism had paid off. Economic support from the American churches was also improving during the early 1940s after the depression of the 30s but no new personnel could travel during the war to relieve field staff. In 1946 Evelyn became ill and the Grabers returned to the US for medical counsel. No effective help was found. Evelyn Graber died in Illinois in 1947.

When Archie returned to Congo alone in 1948 he was assigned the task of building a new Protestant mission station at Tshikapa, headquarters of the FORMINIERE diamond mining company, a hundred miles south of Djoko Punda. Kalonda, chief of the Lulua people on the east bank of the Kasai, offered him temporary housing. When he asked for a concession of twenty-five hectares the first reaction of the colonial administrator appeared positive. Then opposition seemed to set in: from the Catholic bishop? from the diamond mining company? from the local administrator? For two years Archie used his courtesy, diplomatic skills and patient prodding before a ten-hectare concession was granted in 1950. The following year he married Irma Beitler, a nurse who had come to Djoko Punda in 1948. Together they launched the building of the Kalonda station near Tshikapa.

The times in which Kalonda/Tshikapa was built was like no other seen before or after. The colonial administration in its ten-year plan 1950-59 outlined major investments in roads, telecommunications, health care and education. The agitations for political independence in Ghana and elsewhere in Africa were noticed in the Congo with small ethnic and regional political groups forming to advocate an acceleration toward independence. Professor Van Bilsen in an article published in Brussels suggested a thirty-year transition in the transfer of power. New dimensions of opportunity were also expanding the horizons of the Congo Inland Mission. Governments in Brussels were extending subsidies also to the Protestant missions — subsidies for schools and health care formerly reserved only for the Catholic missions. Postwar missionary recruits were ready to serve in Africa. Matthew Kazadi, a leading Muluba pastor

from Djoko Punda, toured the supporting Mennonite churches of North America in 1958 and came back with reports of the possibilities open to a free society. The CIM doubled its stations from four to eight in the 1950s and increased the number of its missionaries from twenty-seven after the war to a hundred and seven in 1959 just before the mass evacuations after independence.

Within that exuberant setting Archie and Irma together with new colleagues built Kalonda. By the time the Grabers went on a year's furlough to America in 1959 the station had four dwellings for seven missionaries, an eight-room primary school, a medical dispensary, a Bible training institute, and a beautiful church with Archie's signature arches. Nearly three thousand members had joined the Tshikapa area churches. In addition, he had won the respect of the government officials and the managers of the FORMINIERE.

As the Grabers, together with their daughter Nancy, were packing to return to the Congo in July 1960 they received word that the political and security situation of the newly-independent country was not encouraging and that they should stay in America until further notice.

The mutiny of soldiers in Lower Congo had also reignited the hatreds between the Lulua and the Baluba still smoldering from the confrontations of 1959. The Lulua felt threatened by Baluba leaders in western Kasai and forced them under threat of death to return to eastern Kasai, the Baluba homeland. By August 1960, there were two hundred thousand Baluba refugees in East Kasai overloading the social structures, degenerating rapidly toward famine. By mid-August key mission agencies had created the Congo Protestant Relief Agency (CPRA) to help alleviate suffering in the country. The first need was East Kasai. The CPRA asked Archie to head the relief efforts in Bakwanga (Mbuji Mai), the capital of East Kasai. He spoke the language, knew the culture of the people and had the common sense and know-how to improvise and get things done. On September 2 he said goodbye to his wife and daughter in Toledo and set out for the Congo.

In Leopoldville (Kinshasa) he learned that the former shipping channels of river barges to Port-Francqui and rail to Luluabourg and Muena Ditu were closed. He flew to Lobito in Angola and made arrangements for supplies to come by rail the southern route through Tshombe's Katanga and then up to Muena Ditu, the rail head of East Kasai. As long as the breakaway provinces of Katanga and East Kasai were on friendly terms this route for supplies was possible.

With a bag full of tactics and persistence he was able to get temporary trucks from the local government until his CPRA trucks arrived. He bought food from

Portuguese and Belgian traders until his outside supply lines were operational. His distribution staff included Baluba friends he had known from Djoko Punda and Tshikapa. A large map in his makeshift office pinpointed twenty centres where food and medical supplies were being delivered to the ever increasing numbers of refugees. Tunisian troops flown in by the UN were helpful. The later Ghanaian troops were suspect by local authorities for supporting Lumumba's central government agenda. In addition, Archie had to tread carefully through local political rivalries. He selectively obeyed conflicting regulations, ignored others. But food and medicines reached the people and gradually the first needs were met.

By November 1960 he started distributing seed corn and cassava sticks so that the refugees would produce some of their own food with the second rains coming in January. Then he flew in baby chicks to sell to villagers who wished to supplement diets with eggs and meat. By February 1961 he set up a warehouse with nails, lumber and cement where Kasaians could buy supplies to build more permanent shelters. At every step he kept a graduated programme from total dependence to gradual independence and responsibility. He had confidence in his people. They had confidence in him. As soon as the people were settling in he revived his favoured project of distributing Bible literature. As in the Djoko Punda and Tshikapa regions earlier he now stocked a minivan with book shelves and started peddling Christian literature of encouragement to the faithful and to the seekers.

In August '61 Archie left for the States to see his family. The Kasai crisis had eased. He could take a few months to rest and reflect. By end December '61 he and his family were back in the Congo. His wife and daughter would remain in Leopoldville while he commuted to Bakwanga for a few weeks at a time.

He would encourage African staff and Presbyterian missionaries as they assumed responsibilities of the supply centres.

But another crisis was ready to explode in Katanga. In February 1962 the Methodists of Katanga approached him for assistance in dealing with Baluba refugees who were crowding into a camp near Swedish troops stationed in Elisabethville (Lubumbashi) under UN mandate. As in western Kasai where the Lulua expelled the Baluba because they took the senior jobs in government and business, so now in Katanga the dominant Lunda were menacing the Baluba who had taken the best jobs in the copper mines. Some job holders would still go to work in the morning but increasingly they returned to the camp for UN protection at night. From late 1961 the camp kept growing and neither persuasion nor coercion

by the Swedes could dislodge the refugees. From a trickle the camp had grown to fifty thousand in February '62. Reconciliation on jobs and governance between and Baluba and Lunda appeared impossible. The UN was determined to clean out the camp. But where could they send the refugees? The Methodists had heard of Archie's remarkable success at resettling the Baluba from western Kasai. Could he now help the UN do the same with resettlement of the Baluba in the Katanga camp?

Mid-March '62 Archie was in Elisabethville for briefing by Swedish officials who sought his counsel on repatriation of the Baluba to East Kasai. Archie said he'd have to talk first to the leaders in the camp. They agreed and said they'd provide him with military escort since there was much violence in the camp with young thugs enforcing control with whirling bicycle chains. No, said Archie, he could only enter the camps as a man of God and friend of the people. Reluctantly they allowed him to enter alone.

At the entrance he greeted the people: "Moyo Wenu (Life to You)". They listened. He spoke their language well with familiar accents. He asked to speak to the fathers. They sat together in the shade and discussed the situation in Katanga and the future of their children. He wondered whether some would wish to move back to the Kasai if they had protection in the move and assistance to restart life in their "homeland". They talked for several days. Gradually a majority said they'd be willing to resettle. Archie then helped them organize a census of families and households of those who wanted to move. Nearly five thousand families were willing to go. Archie said he'd talk to their kin in the Kasai. Three weeks later he had surveyed the chiefs in the Kasai to ascertain how many refugees could be received in each village. Then he helped the UN organize the move: by train to Kamina, by plane to Bakwanga, with tents and food and trucks at each transfer point. The move took two months from May through July 1962. By late July fifty-four thousand refugees had been relocated to East Kasai, another twenty thousand resettled in North Katanga. The camp site was razed and cleaned up. Total cost to the UN: two million dollars. And the refugees were immensely grateful to a gentle man who had been their tireless friend and arbiter. A year later Archie's family joined him in Bakwanga where they stayed another two years distributing baby chicks (twenty thousand) and running a carpenter shop and supply centre for the many who were building more permanent homes. By 1965 the CPRA closed its office in the Kasai and the people were on their own.

For another four years Archie helped CPRA run relief projects in other parts of the Congo as troubles multiplied under new threats of rebel movements and

factional disputes. Archie and Irma decided to retire from the Congo in 1969. His many friends organized a special day for them at the Kalonda/Tshikapa station they had built in the 1950s. Representatives from the whole region came to celebrate and to say farewell: Bakuba, Bashilele, Bampende, Batshiokwe, Bena Lulua and Baluba. Even his long-time friend Matthew Kazadi — who had lost his coffee plantations and house to the Lulua in Djoko Punda — came from East Kasai to thank Archie and Irma for their committed lives. Speaking for the assembled throng he read a message of gratitude which said in part: "We experience a deep joy to testify to this generous family our total gratitude. Archie was not satisfied to limit his activities to preaching but succeeded in setting a standard which is nothing more than the application of the supreme commandment of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ: Live what You Teach". They then prepared tables under the Mango trees and feasted and reminisced as they said goodbye in tears and laughter.

In fact Archie did return a few more times. Once, in 1972, to help build dwellings and an administrative centre for the new emerging independent church in downtown Tshikapa near the airport, and again in 1978 when at the invitation of his long-time friend and supporter, Eric Sauder, they together made a trip through Africa including the Congo.

Archie's wife Irma died on 29 September, 1995. Archie died where he was born in western Ohio on 31 August, 1997 at age 96.

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M. J. Loewen.

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