EDSON WHITE

Birth: July 1849
Death: May 30, 1928
Family: Father - James White
Mother - Ellen White
Siblings - Henry, William, John Herbert
Spouse - 1st - Emma MacDearman
2nd - Rebecca Burrill

Accomplishments: Printer, compiler of S.D.A. Sabbath School songbook Song Anchor and Temperance Songs. Vice-president of General Sabbath School Association, captain of the Morning Star, missionary to blacks along the Mississippi, publisher, author
The children of celebrities and well-known people sometimes have a hard time growing up. Being in the public eye, they are not always treated the same as other children. People often expect more of them. This is especially true when their parents are Christian leaders.

Elder and Mrs. White were rather famous people back in the 1800’s. This may have been part of the reason that Edson White, James and Ellen’s third son, gave them so many gray hairs as he was growing up.

One of Edson’s biggest problems was his carelessness with money. He spent it without much thought. He was also very generous with it, too generous. Anyone wanting a loan could always depend on Edson for some quick cash.

He must have also been unruly at times. It is reported that when Edson was a teenager, Mrs. White considered setting aside her ministry so that she could concentrate more on improving his conduct. She was afraid there wasn’t enough time to travel around the country and raise Edson at the same time.

While Edson didn’t accept his parents’ devotion to God, he did share his father’s interest in the printing trade. Although for a short time, he studied to become a doctor.

Shortly after he married Emma McDearmon, Edson, along with brother Willie, and John Harvey Kellogg, went to New Jersey and enrolled in Dr. Trall’s Hygieo-Therapeutic College. Dr. Trall promised the young men a full medical degree after just six months of schooling.

Before he finished the course, Edson wrote to his parents and told them just what he thought of his medical education. Edson described
Thrall a "villain," the school itself "a humbug," and the food, revolting. After medical school, Edson worked at different jobs, but fortunately he stayed away from medicine.

Edson and Emma eventually moved to Chicago where Edson found work as a printer, and all too soon found himself in debt. Again.

His mother Ellen worried about him a lot. He was no longer a rebellious teenager, but his relationship with God was like a light switch--on, off, on, off. She did her best to stay in contact with Edson through letters, even when she was traveling around the world.

While Mrs. White enjoyed hearing from him, some of his letters grieved her greatly. But it was one of those distressing letters that started a chain of events that resulted in a wonderful change in his life.

Edson was in his middle 40's when he wrote to his mother that he was "not at all religiously inclined."

Heart broken, Ellen wrote back, pleading with her son to change the direction of his life. She went to bed that night without finishing the letter. But sometime after midnight she had a dream.

She saw Edson wading out into the ocean with some friends. The waves grew larger and more violent, and she realized that her son was in danger.

Ellen tried to call him back to shore. She waved her arms and shouted, "Edson, the undertow! Come out as fast as you can!" But Edson ignored her advice. And when another young man tried to rescue him, Edson made a joke of the whole thing.

Suddenly the powerful current started pulling Edson under water. He shrieked in terror. And Mrs. White awoke from her bad dream.

Unable to sleep, she prayed for her wayward son. Then she picked
up a pen, lit the lamp, and picked up the letter she had left on the desk.

She told Edson about her dream. Then she went on to explain how the undertow illustrated Edson's love of independence and his on again, off again religious experience.

She ended the letter by saying, "I cannot save you; God alone can save you." But work, while Jesus invites you, in harmony with God."
Mother Ellen’s letter deeply bothered Edson. As he read it over and over again, he realized that what she was saying was right. The need to be in charge of his own life didn’t seem as important as it had been before. Edson was ready to stop running away from what he knew was right.

Soon he wrote back to his mother describing his conversion.

I have surrendered fully and completely, and never enjoyed life before as I am now. . . . I have no desire for amusements and pleasures that made up the sum of my enjoyments before, but have an enjoyment in the meetings with the people of God such as I never had . . . .

After renewing his commitment to God, Edson began looking for a new purpose in life. At a Bible Institute, he met Dr. J. E. Caldwell. Dr. Caldwell described his work among the poor people in a black community down in Tennessee.

Edson’s interest grew. He met with Dr. Caldwell a number of times. The doctor also mentioned that two years earlier at the 1891 General Conference, Edson’s mother had spoken about the need for workers to help the former slaves and their children who still lived an oppressed life in the South. Suddenly Edson had found his special niche. He would share God’s love with this often-forgotten group of people. And he knew just how he’d do it.

In 1894 at the age of 45, he started a boat-building project in Allegan, Michigan. His dream was to build a paddlewheel steamer that could be used as a portable church and school. He designed the ship to be 12 feet wide and 72 feet long. It would have a chapel, print shop, darkroom, apartments for himself and his crew, a library, kitchen, and
various storage areas.

While he was building his boat, Edson also wrote a simple beginning reader which he could use in his classes. *The Gospel Primer*, which was sold for 25 cents, was not only an education tool, but also a fund raiser. It became a best seller and helped support Edson’s teaching ministry.

*The Morning Star*, as the ship was called, eventually made its way down the Mississippi River. And by 1895 Edson saw his first students come aboard the traveling classroom.

For a decade, Edson traveled up and down the Mississippi River in his paddle boat teaching and preaching to all who would listen. The Southern Missionary Society which he founded eventually established nearly 50 schools for black children and their parents.

Life on the river was not easy for Edson or Emma. He had two strikes against him.

First, many people didn’t want him, or anyone else, helping the former slaves. The rich land owners felt they could have more control over their workers if they couldn’t read or write.

The second problem had to do with the religious leaders. As Edson and his helpers taught the people to read, they shared the Adventist message. Area pastors became angry as their members began keeping the Sabbath.

But Edson’s stubbornness helped him stay with his mission. And he continued to work in the South until *The Morning Star* sank in 1905 after 10 years of service.

Edson eventually returned to Marshall, Michigan, where he manufactured stereoptican (picture) slides for evangelists and Bible workers. He died in 1929 at 80 years of age.
Although Edson spent many years away from God looking for happiness, he eventually found that the greatest joy and peace comes when one unites his life with God and finds a way to serve others.

References:  
Ellen G. White biography series by Arthur White.  
*Early Adventist Educators*, George Knight  
*Mission to Black America*, Ronald D. Graybill  
*James White, Virgil Robinson*  
*The Southern Work*  
"Edson’s Morning Star" (Catch the Vision)
Edson White Worksheet

1. Explain to the students that Edson had both strengths and weaknesses. Have the students take a piece of notebook paper and draw a line down the middle. On one side, they should write the word Weaknesses and on the other Strengths. Encourage them to think of their own strengths and weaknesses and write them under the appropriate heading. When they are finished have each child mention one of their strengths and one weakness. As a class you could offer ways the strength could be improved and the weaknesses could be eliminated.

2. Give students a piece of drawing paper. Ask them to think of the strengths they have. They can then choose one and draw a picture showing how they could use that strength to serve others.

3. Read the following "Dear Abby" letters aloud. Ask the students to offer suggestions.

Dear Abby:
My husband and I have always been careful with our money. But our son is so careless. He spends his money as soon as he gets it. How can we teach him to be more responsible?
Two Worried Parents

Dear Abby:
Our pastor and his wife are the nicest people you'd ever want to know. But their one son is a real problem. I don't want him playing with my son. But my husband says that we could help him if we had him over once in awhile. What do you think?
Bothered in Battle Creek

4. Discuss with the students the difference between good pride and destructive pride.

5. Negro spirituals were written with the notes of the black keys on the piano. Have the students try playing the following on just the black keys:

"Swing Low, Sweet Chariot"
"Deep River"
"Steal Away"

6. Many of the spirituals had double meanings. Not only did they speak of faith in God, but also the hope of freedom. Read through the words of some of the songs and as a class try to identify the "hidden meaning" that the slaves may have put in the songs.
The public views the members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church as a very healthy group of people. In scientific studies, it has been learned that Adventists on the average live nearly 10 years longer than the general population. The main reason for this is the counsel given through the writings of Ellen White. Ellen received many visions about health which included areas such as food, rest, sunlight, and water.

You might think that because Ellen lived to the ripe old age of 87, and since she received many messages about better living that she herself was always quite healthy. Just the opposite is true. She suffered from poor health most of her life.

As you know, when she was nine years old Ellen was struck in the face by a large rock thrown by an angry classmate. The accident not only left Ellen's face scarred, but it also left her in poor health for the rest of her life. The classmate was very sorry for the injury she caused to Ellen, but the damage had been done, and there was no way to change it. You may have heard a parent or teacher warn you (perhaps often) to be extra careful. They do this because they know that one accident can affect your whole life.

Have you ever expected that you were going somewhere special, but for some reason you did not get to go? That is what happened to Ellen and the other Advent believers. It was a terrible disappointment when Jesus did not return as expected. It is hard for us to imagine the hopelessness that our pioneers felt. Hiram Edson said that losing all of his friends on earth could not compare to how badly he felt. At this time Ellen's health became even worse. Ellen later wrote about her
condition. She related how the doctor said that her lungs were "diseased" and "decayed." She often woke up "coughing and bleeding at the lungs."

Ellen had just turned seventeen. Occasionally, ladies from the church would take her home with them for a few days, because her sickness caused much extra work for her mother.

Throughout her married life Mrs. White suffered from problems such as arthritis, weak spells, and even cancer. She did out live her husband by thirty years, but she nearly died on the same day that he did.

Both had been very sick that week in 1881. When James began to get weaker, Ellen got out of bed to be by her husband. She stayed at his side all night and all the next day until he died. Then she almost collapsed. That night Dr. Kellogg, along with two attendants, watched over her.

Ellen, always thoughtful of others, told the two attendants to go to sleep, which they fortunately did not do. During the night they checked her and couldn't find her pulse. The doctor worked with the two helpers until three in the morning, using electricity, ice, and hot sponges on her spine until she improved.

Ellen's "special work" as she called it also added to her poor health. She often had to tell people that she had been shown—in a vision or a dream—that something they were doing was not pleasing to God. Sometimes people got very angry with her for this. She once wrote about her work:

All through my life it has been terribly hard for me to hurt the feelings of any. . . . It is contrary to my nature. It costs me great pain and many sleepless nights.

After the Minneapolis General Conference session in 1888 Ellen's
"special work" caused her to write, "This laid upon me the heaviest burdens I could bear."--MS 2, 1888. She was absolutely discouraged, and became quite ill. Ellen later wrote, "I had no power even to pray, and no desire to live. Rest, only rest, was my desire . . ." Ellen did not even want anyone else to pray for her recovery. But she admitted later that "it was not the will of my heavenly Father. My work was not yet done."

In 1915 Mrs. White broke her hip and was rarely able to get out of bed after that. She died six months later on July 16. Her last home was in Elmshaven, California.

The two funeral services in California were attended by 1400 friends, neighbors, and family. Then her faithful son, Willie, rode on the train with his mother's casket to Battle Creek where the final service was held at the Dime Tabernacle on Sabbath, July 24. Over 4000 thousand people came to say their last goodbyes.

Reference: In Memoriam--Mrs. E.G. White, pamphlet by E. G. White Estate.