

# The Story of Forgiveness

by Lynne Belluscio

Recently the Baptist Church borrowed their old silver communion set that had been given to the Historical Society many years ago. The Church was hosting the descendents of James Howard Covell and his wife Charma Marie Moore.

Their story is a tragic one. J. Howard Covell was born in 1896 in Athens, Pennsylvania. He was the youngest son of Rev. Milton Covell, a Baptist minister. The family came to LeRoy in 1905. Howard graduated from LeRoy High School in 1913 and attended the University of Rochester for two years and then graduated from the School of Religious Pedagogy in Hartford Connecticut and Brown University. He received his Masters Degree from Union Theological Seminary. He volunteered for missionary service and was sent to Japan where he served as an instructor at the Mabie Memorial School for Boys from 1920 to 1938.

In 1922, he met Charma Marie Moore, a missionary who was teaching in Osaka and they were married. They survived the terrible earthquake in Yokohama in 1923, when their home was destroyed by fire. They had three children, Margaret, David and Alice.

In 1936 the family returned to LeRoy and Mr. and Mrs. Covell addressed the Baptist Church congregation and made a plea for understanding of the Japanese people. Mr. Covell said that the people of Japan should not be measured by the acts of the imperial government. The

Covells returned to Japan and remained there until the outbreak of the war and then they sent their children to the United States and they transferred to Iloilo in the Philippine Islands where Howard was the professor of English in Central Philippine College.

A letter to Howard's mother, who lived on Myrtle Street, said that "We are all in good health and spirits - - We have plenty of food, plenty of money (so far) good houses relative peace and quiet on this island." When the Japanese invaded the Philippines the Covells and other missionaries went into the hills. The Japanese burned the college and the Covell home. For several months, Howard's mother had no communication with her son. Her granddaughter, Margaret (Peggy), was attending Keuka College. The *LeRoy Gazette* noted that Margaret's parents were considered missing, although their names did not appear on the official list of captured Americans given by the Japanese.

The months dragged on with no news. Then in March 1944, the War Department notified Howard's brother in Oneida that Howard and his wife had been captured by the Japanese on December 19, 1943 and it was believed that they were dead. The American Baptist Foreign Missionary Society reported that the Covells were among eleven Baptist missionaries beheaded on Panay Island after their capture on December 19, 1943.

A story reported by *Associated Press*, gave a gruesome account related by a student of the Covells who witnessed the event. The missionaries had camped in a mountain valley they named "Hopeville." When the Japanese invaded the island they first captured an American Army Lieutenant and two other engineers. A Filipino native, after being threatened, disclosed the location of the missionaries and



J. Howard and Charma M. Covell

soon the Japanese surrounded the camp. Mrs. Covell, with her hands tied behind her back made an impassioned plea, but was the first to be killed. Sixteen people were murdered, including the 11 missionaries, which included six women. It was reported that two young American boys also met the same fate. (I don't understand the next part of the story. The United Press story gives the name of the Japanese officer who wielded the sword that fateful day, yet in 1947, when a memorial service was held for the Covells in Yokohama, it is the same man who gave the tribute to "our teacher, friend and martyr.") Mr. Watanabe told the audience at the memorial service: "Who was it drove this man away and killed him? Was it not we Japanese whom he loved so much? Mere mourning is not enough, it is our duty and privilege to take up the torch from his fallen hands and move on to build a new society which he dreamed of and fought for. Every Christian, if he loved Mr. Covell should make up his mind strongly that he will never repeat this mistake again."

I tried to find out more about the Covell tragedy and discovered another interesting story on the internet. A Japanese soldier, believed that Japanese atrocities were probably matched by American atrocities toward prisoners of war and he began interviewing returning Japanese prisoners of war.

One man he interviewed had been captured by the Americans and he attempted several times to take his own life but was stopped each time. Later he was nursed back to health by a young woman and this was the story he told: "After the war ended, an 18 year-old American girl came to

the camp as a volunteer social worker. She helped the Japanese POWs with great energy and kindness. Her name was Margaret Covell, but the men called her Peggy. She would do anything to help them. Three weeks after she arrived, a prisoner asked her, "Why are you so kind to us?" Her answer was, "Because Japanese soldiers killed my parents." The prisoners were astonished as she told the story of how her Christian missionary parents were killed by the Japanese army in the interior of the Philippines. They were wrongly accused of being US spies; they were tried, convicted, and then beheaded.

Peggy found out about this tragedy at the end of the war. She was full of hatred for the Japanese at first. But as she thought of their final moments, she came to realize that her parents must have been praying for the forgiveness and salvation of these Japanese soldiers. So she decided to follow her parents' example by forgiving and helping some Japanese POWs.

Captain Fuchida was astonished to hear such a story, and was filled with shame. He talked to all the other former POWs who knew Peggy and he soon lost interest in his project of searching for instances of brutality in US POW Camps. He even searched for sources in the Philippines to verify Peggy's story. Sure enough, he heard that just before the swords were drawn for their execution, the husband and wife were united in prayer. Captain Fuchida's life was changed by Peggy Covell's story and he converted to Christianity and devoted his life to the teachings of forgiveness and peace.



This photo was taken on the steps of the Covell home in Yokohama, Japan.