

Our Documentary Heritage

E. R. Kellersberger, Medical Missionary to the Congo and the World

That Christ may live in us, through us, giving us a special anointing for the Congo work.

That we may practice the Presence of God always, every moment.

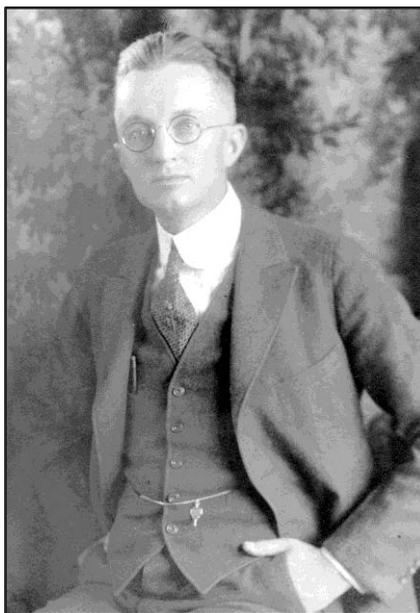
*Open the way for us to go to **THY** work and to **OUR** work in safety.*

May we be able to procure money in Bordeaux.

May our baggage be kept safe and all our freight arrive intact at our mission station.

These excerpts from a prayer written in the opening days of his career as a medical missionary to the Belgian Congo are indicative of the deep faith and the ever-pragmatic outlook that guided the life and work of Eugene R. Kellersberger, M.D. The Presbyterian Historical Society holds his fifty diaries dating from 1916, when he was appointed to the Congo mission field of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, to the final entry written one day before his death on 28 January 1966; hundreds of letters; medical work notes; and photographs—remarkable documentary evidence of a life dedicated to Christ, to the church, and to the world.

Eugene Roland Kellersberger was raised in the German immigrant community of Cypress Mill, Texas. He was born on 6 August 1888, the middle child of a family of seven children of Swiss-German parents. Education was a high priority; the children attended the local school which conducted lessons in German. Every night, father



A formal portrait of Eugene Kellersberger, student at the Washington University School of Medicine, c. 1911. (All photographs from Eugene R. Kellersberger Papers, RG 436.)

Julius made his children read and write in both English and German for one hour before allowing them to play games.

After secondary education at the Whitis Academy in Austin, Kellersberger entered the University of Texas in 1907, where he studied biology in

preparation for medical school. His choice of profession was influenced by two physicians. The local doctor in Cypress Mill, Dr. Harwood, attended the fatal illness of his older brother, Hermann. Harwood's compassion and care impressed the young boy profoundly. While at the University of Texas and a newly baptized member of the Highland Presbyterian Church in Austin, Kellersberger met Dr. Wylie Hamilton Forsythe, a medical missionary to Korea. Forsythe challenged the future doctor to choose mission service.

Kellersberger entered the medical school of Washington University in St. Louis in 1911. He married his high school sweetheart, Edna Bosché, in 1912, and together they joined the Westminster Presbyterian Church. At the completion of medical training, the Westminster church consecrated Eugene to mission service. In 1916, after completing a two-year residency in a hospital in Kansas City, Eugene and Edna sailed for the Belgian Congo.

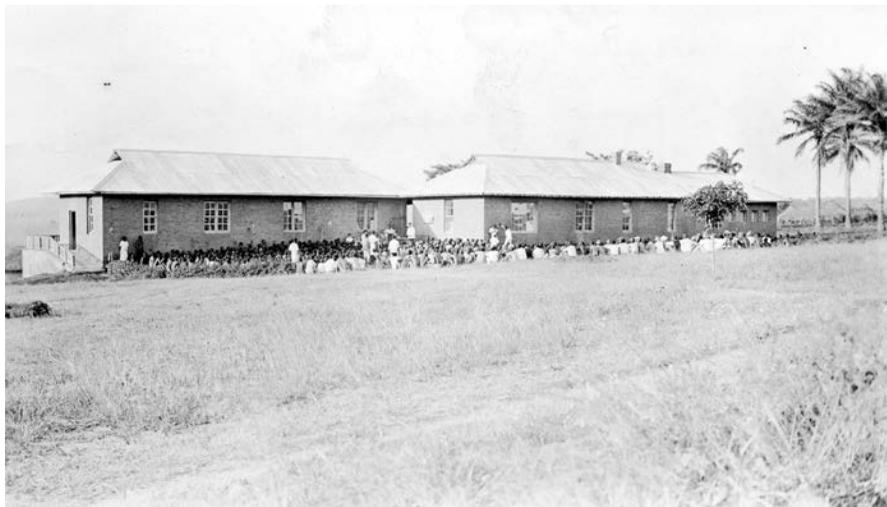
Kellersberger's diaries, correspondence, and medical records



Kellersberger held clinic in a grass hut like this one during his first months at Lusambo, his initial posting in the Congo mission, c. summer 1917.

document a life of adversity, resourcefulness, and hard work in establishing clinics for the American Presbyterian Congo Mission (APCM), the PCUS mission in that region. After a year-long stay at Lusambo, the Kellersbergers were posted to a new field at Bibanga, a hundred miles from the nearest station. For a year, they used the front two rooms of their small four-room house for the clinic, surgery, and dispensary. Sometimes Kellersberger had to perform operations in the open with only a sheet overhead to catch falling debris. Curious onlookers and relatives of the patient crowded around to watch. During his first furlough in 1919–21, Kellersberger appealed to congregations for funding with which to build a hospital with cement floors, a real roof, and “an operating room that has a door that can be shut so that privacy, cleanliness, and concentration can be assured.”

While serving as summer conference physician at Montreat, North Carolina,



Dedication ceremonies of the completed Edna Kellersberger Memorial Hospital at Bibanga, summer 1923.

Kellersberger befriended Charles Lukens Huston, a Quaker and wealthy steel manufacturer from Pennsylvania. Huston pledged the funds to construct the Bibanga hospital, which included lab space, modern equipment, and a sanitary surgery.

Kellersberger quickly established himself as an able physician. In his first term (1916–19), he diagnosed and treated a veritable textbook full of diseases, infections, and conditions, some of which he had never seen before. During the furlough he completed a three-month certificate course at the London School of Tropical Medicine (1920–21). When he returned to Bibanga late in 1921, he began clinical documentation of African sleeping sickness (trypanosomiasis), caused by the bite of the tsetse fly; the disease progressively sapped the vitality of its victim. Sleeping sickness was rampant throughout the Congo. Edna Kellersberger was infected a few months after their return.

Kellersberger quickly evacuated his family to London where

his wife Edna continued treatment under British specialists. Kellersberger took their two small daughters, Winifred and Cornelia, to live with Edna's sister in North Carolina. Edna stayed in the hospital for seven months; despite several relapses her unshakable faith and tenacity pulled her through. Relieved of parenting duties for the moment, Kellersberger helped his wife through the lengthy convalescence, while completing a full diploma in tropical medicine and surgery at the Royal College of Physicians.

Now fully accredited as a colonial medical service doctor in the Congo, Kellersberger gained access to public health facilities and documents with which to continue research on sleeping sickness. His notes on diagnosis and drug therapies contributed to the development of better treatment protocols and, eventually, to an effective cure. He reported his findings in several international medical journals.

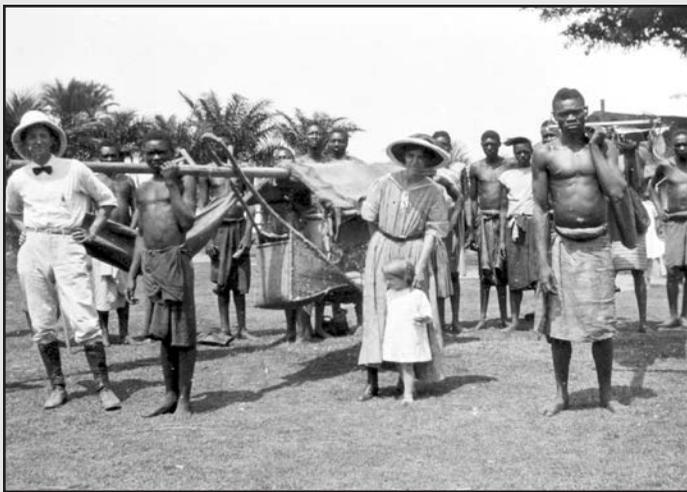
However, almost immediately after returning alone to



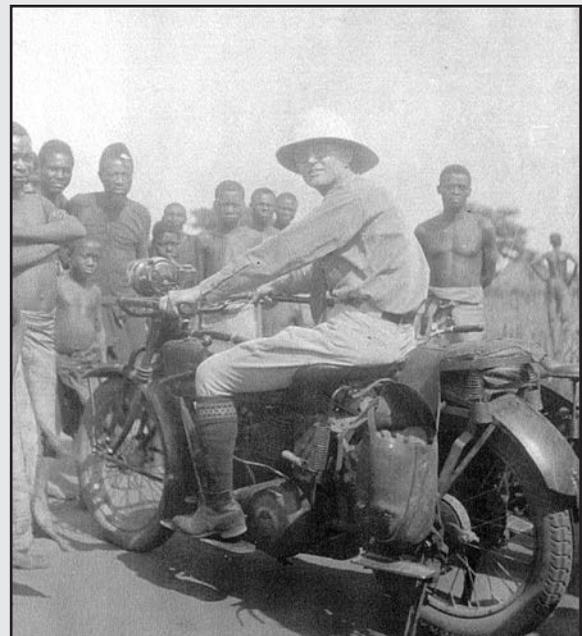
Sleeping sickness victims faint or “fall asleep” for hours at a time as the disease progresses.



Dr. Kellersberger examines a sleeping sickness patient on the grounds of the hospital.

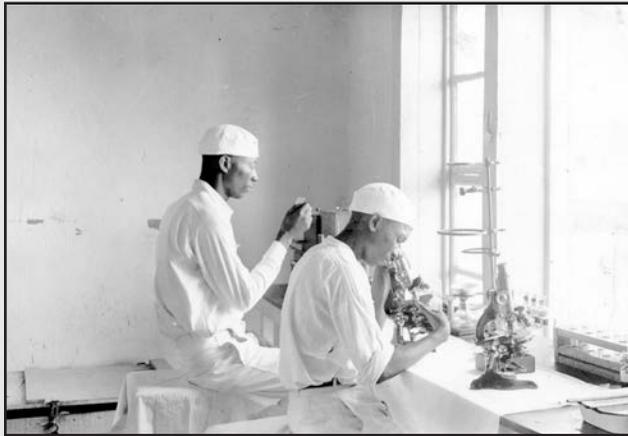


As one of a very few medical doctors for the APCM, and often the only one, Kellersberger was called to treat injured and ill missionaries sometimes hundreds of miles away.



In 1926, he became a licensed colonial government medical official and was in charge of a large region where he conducted public health surveys. He used all these forms of transportation to get around.





The new hospital facilities enabled the mission staff to upgrade the level of diagnostic and primary care for patients by using modern equipment, replacing inefficient methods.

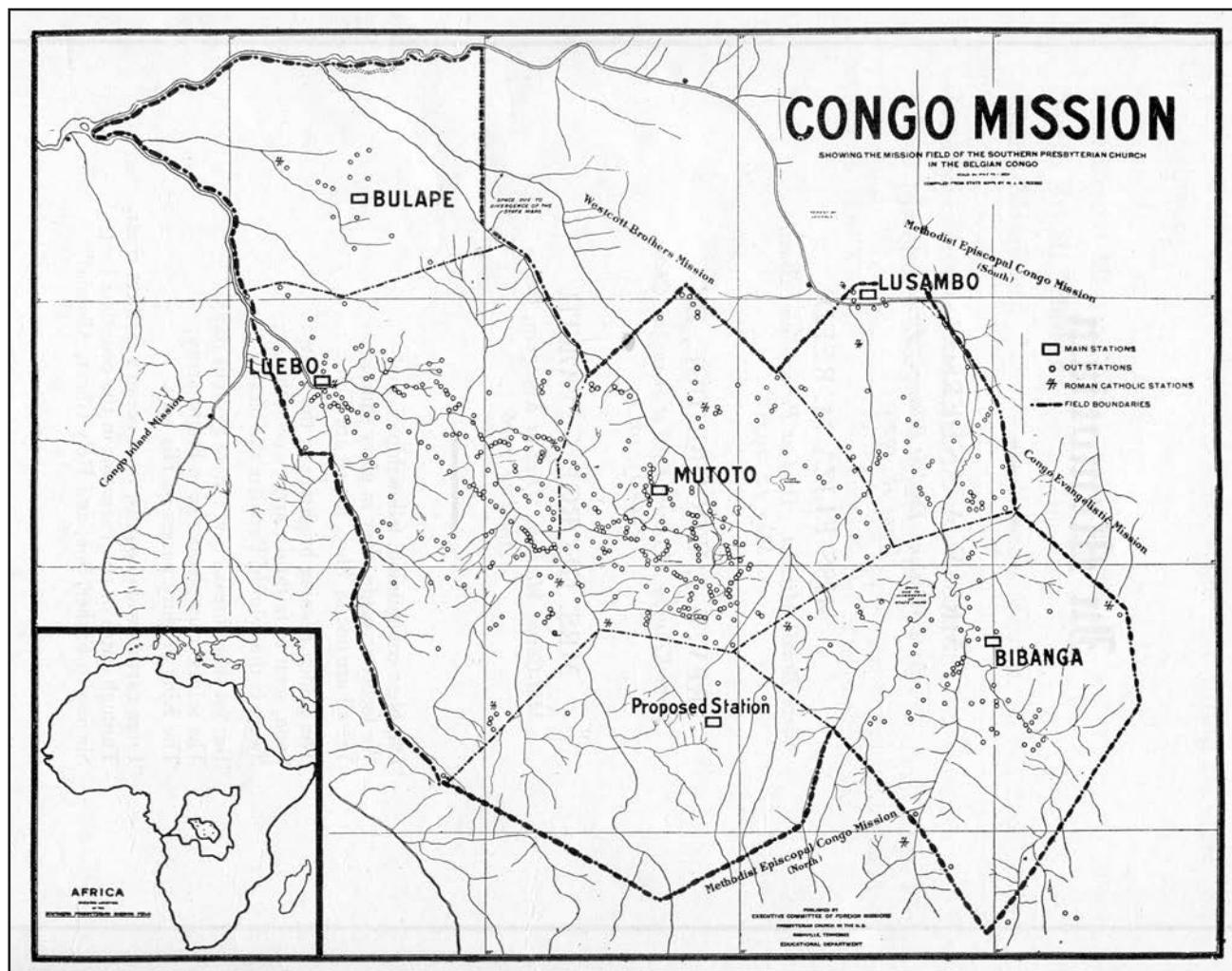
Bibanga and the new hospital, Kellersberger received word that his beloved Edna, who had remained in the U.S. with their daughters, had been murdered in October 1923. Overwhelmed with grief, he returned to his family in January 1924. During this brief furlough, several important events occurred: he was ordained in Westminster Church, St. Louis, as a minister of the Upper Missouri Presbytery; he decided to leave his girls in the care of family members; and in July, just before he returned to

Africa, he met Julia Lake Skinner, the director of Christian education at First Presbyterian Church, Knoxville, Tennessee, whom he would marry in May 1929.

To combat loneliness during his second full term of service (1924–28), Kellersberger threw himself into his work. His records show an unprecedented number of clinical visits, surgeries, and emergency calls which often took him hundreds of miles away. As a colonial service doctor, he had charge of public health for the entire

population of the Luilashi Valley of the Kasai region. For two of those years, he was the only physician for the APCM, whose personnel were scattered over 83,000 square miles in five localities. Dr. Kellersberger relied on many forms of transportation to get to emergency calls.

The final ten years of his Congo service (1930–40) were marked by a shift in his attention from sleeping sickness to research and treatment of leprosy (Hansen's disease); all the while, he carried a full clinical



Stations of the PCUS Congo Mission (*Annual Report of the Executive Committee of Foreign Missions, 1927*).

and surgical case load, as well as serving as hospital administrator and teacher. Kellersberger received permission to found a leprosarium at Bibanga, a work the APCM had been reluctant to undertake. The Bibanga leprosy colony received financial assistance from the American Mission to Lepers, a Christian organization with international ties, to fund a clinic, school, church, homes, and a grove of chaulmoogra oil trees, the source of a promising treatment. After experimenting with several formularies, the Bibanga colony used an injection of chaulmoogra oil and five percent creosote. Kellersberger's reports of his

findings in leading medical journals led to his being recognized as an authority on the disease. Working with the most despised and desperately ill of African society brought him enormous personal satisfaction and joy.

His last year in the Congo was a time of frustration and overwhelming work. The coming of World War II constricted the availability of currency and medical supplies. Belgium's surrender to Germany threw the Congolese colonial government into disarray. The APCM was understaffed, and Kellersberger's diary entries for the final months were full of concern and discouragement.

On 20 April 1940 he became General Secretary of the American Mission to Lepers (later, the American Leprosy Mission [ALM]), the organization that had funded the mission's five leper colonies. Saddened over leaving his heart's work but excited about this new adventure, he and Julia moved to New York that fall. For the next fifteen years, Kellersberger led the ALM in an aggressive public relations campaign to educate governments and public health officials about new drug treatments and the necessity of programs that would identify the disease at its earliest stage. During his tenure, new drug therapies sent

9	Operation	Date	Anaesth	Patient	Operator	Asst	Nurse	Anaesth
1.	Sebaceous Cyst (Head)	Aug 15 1918	Chloroform	Baluba Woman	Kellersberger	Mrs McKee		
	Hairlip (single)	Sept 4 1918	"	Baluba Man	"	Mrs McKee	Mrs McKee	
2.	Hairlip (single)	Sept 4 1918	"	Baluba Man	"	Mrs McKee	Mrs McKee	
3.	Inguinal Hernia (Rt.)	Dec 6 1918	Ether	Baluba Man	"			
4.	Inguinal Hernia (left)	Nov 6 1918	Ether	Baluba Man	"	Mrs K.	Mrs McKee	
5.	Fat Tumor - (left Scapula)	Dec 17 '18	Local	Baluba Boy	"			
6.	Curettement & Dilatation	Dec 18 '18	Chloroform	Bona Koni	"	Mrs K.	Mrs McKee	
7.	Ing. Hernia & Hydrocoele (left)	Dec 19 '18	Ether	Bona Koni	"	Mrs McKee	Mrs McKee	
8.	Cyst (rt forearm)	Dec 26 '18	Local	Baluba Man	"	Mrs McKee	Mrs McKee	
9.	Inguinal Hernia (left)	Jan 3 1919	Ether	Baluba Man	"	Mrs McKee	Mrs McKee	
10.	Inguinal Hernia (rt.)	Jan 3 1919	Ether	Bona Koni	"	Mrs McKee	Mrs McKee	
11.	Inguinal Hernia (rt.)	June 19 1919	Ether	Bona Koni	"	Mrs McKee	Mrs McKee	
12.	Acute Mastoiditis (rt.)	June 17 1919	Chloroform	Baluba Boy	"			
13.	Hydrocoele (very large left)	Aug 22 1919	Local	Baluba Man	"	Mrs McKee	Mrs McKee	
14.	Appendectomy, Fibroidectomy, Ovarectomy	June 26 1919	Ether	Bona Woman	"	Mrs McKee	Mrs McKee	
15.	Large Double Hydrocoele (old)	July 17 1919	Local	Baluba Man	"			

Dr. Kellersberger documented all the surgeries he performed as a doctor for the APCM from August 1918 to 5 September 1940, a total of 1,640 cases.

more patients into remission and back home. He also made a global tour in the 1940s of all the leprosy facilities in existence—sixty-five institutions in thirty-five countries—and documented his odyssey in his book, *Doctor of the Happy Landings*.

In 1955 Kellersberger retired to an active life as a lecturer and fisherman in South Melbourne Beach, Florida. He never lost his passion for educating physicians and the public about tropical medicine and Hansen’s disease or promoting the medical mission cause, even as he became too infirm to travel far in his final days. He died while fishing off his back pier.

Winifred Kellersberger Vass entitled the biography of her father *Doctor Not Afraid*. It is the English translation of his African name—Ngangabuke Bukitu—given to him by his leprosy patients, who exclaimed, “He is not afraid to touch us.” Throughout his life, as physician, minister, educator, and self-proclaimed citizen of the world, Eugene Kellersberger touched lives too numerous to count. **P**



Kellersberger opened the first leprosy clinic and residential colony of the APCM at Bibanga in 1930. Here, he poses with lepers of Bibanga.



Kellersberger tells children about leprosy medications in a publicity photograph, c. 1950.



Eugene Kellersberger with his daughter, Winifred, age 2. Winifred Kellersberger Vass followed her father into the Congo mission field and served from 1940 to 1971 as an evangelist and teacher. In 1986 she wrote Eugene’s biography, *Doctor Not Afraid*.