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Life story of Salford's most-famous 'farm girl' on stage

The life of evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson is the subject of a new play that premieres in Woodstock Wednesday.

By Stephen Northfield
Woodstock Bureau

WOODSTOCK — On Wednesday, evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson will be back in the spotlight here where she belongs.

The life of Oxford County's most famous citizen is the subject of *Sister Aimee*, a play written by Woodstock playwright Bill Butt that will be performed for the first time this week at the Woodstock Museum.

McPherson's life began on a dairy farm near Salford, a small village south of Ingersoll and ended 54 years later in a hotel room in Oakland, Calif., from an accidental overdose of sleeping pills.

In between, she founded a church which today boasts 783 congregations in Canada and the U.S., more than 2,000 foreign missions, 30 schools, 32 bible colleges and a radio network which still broadcasts daily in 27 countries.

She authored books, religious plays, more than 200 hymns, hundreds of sermons and started a magazine.

She also drew the ire and perhaps jealousy of established religions who watched as McPherson's show-business approach to preaching — which consisted of acting out sermons on stage with sound and lighting effects, dry ice, even animals if they were called for — drew thousands of people to her mission and made her known throughout the world.

Add in a bit of scandal — rumors of an affair and a 32-day disappearance after being kidnapped — and you've got the stuff that headlines are made of.

But don't lump the sister in with those who have followed in her footsteps and fallen from grace — Aimee wasn't in it for fame and

IF YOU GO

WHAT: *Sister Aimee*, presented by Woodstock Little Theatre and the Oxford Historical Society.

WHERE: Woodstock Museum, Woodstock City Square.

WHEN: 8 p.m., Oct. 18, 19, 20, 21 and Oct. 25, 26, 27, 28.

COST: \$8.50 per person.

fortune.

"It seems clear from her life that she was dedicated to it as a religious cause," says Butt. "Her lifestyle was just one more instrument she used to advance her church."

She died with only \$10,000 in her estate — the millions she had raised while spreading the word were funnelled back into her church.

Her sermons were homey, often dwelling on her experiences growing up in Oxford County. Through all the fame and glory "she remained a farm girl from Salford,"

says the 40-year-old Butt who teaches English part time at the University of Western Ontario. He travelled to Los Angeles to research the play last December and wrote it during the winter months.

Though biographers have tended to focus on the scandal and glamor surrounding McPherson, Butt says he wanted to put the evangelist's life in a broader perspective. "We were interested in her whole life, her ministry, her music, her Oxford roots — these were the sides of her that weren't interesting to other writers."

AIMEE SEMPLE McPHERSON

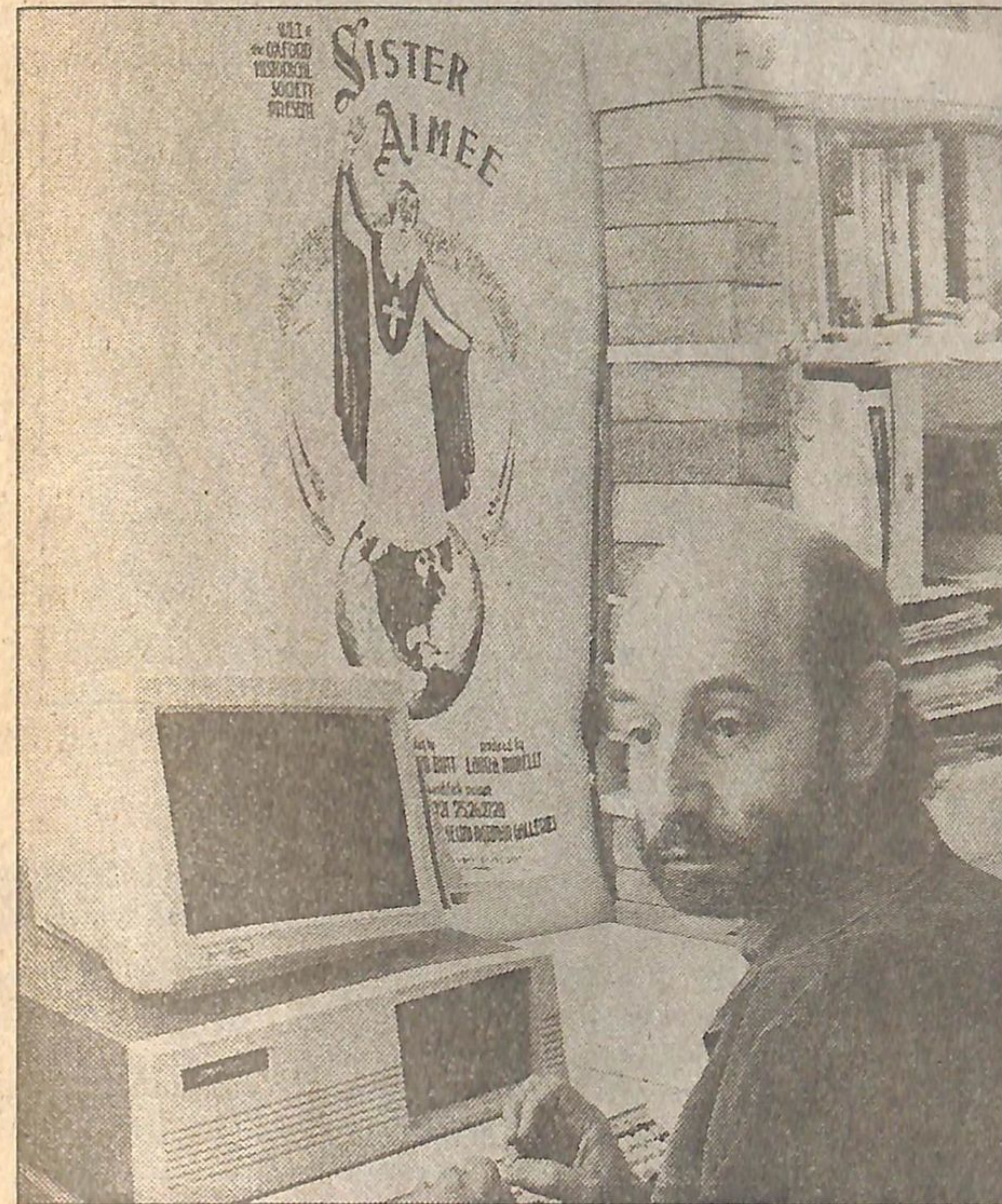
1890: Aimee Kennedy born on a dairy farm near Salford.

1907: Met travelling evangelist Robert Semple. They married and went to do mission work in China where Robert died of malaria in 1909. Soon after returning to Canada she married Harold McPherson. They divorced and McPherson set out as a travelling evangelist, honing her craft across Ontario before packing up her two children and heading for California. She struck gold in Los Angeles where thousands began flocking to hear her preach.

1923: The 5,000-seat Angelus Temple of the Foursquare Gospel was built in Hollywood, financed from money raised by McPherson.

1926: McPherson disappears for 32 days from a beach in California. She turns up in Arizona and she says was kidnapped. Rumors suggest the kidnapping was staged to cover up for an affair.

1944: Found dead in a hotel room in Oakland, Calif., the night after a sermon. Cause of death was an accidental overdose of sleeping pills.



Stephen Northfield/The London Free Press
Woodstock playwright Bill Butt says his play, *Sister Aimee*, isn't just about controversies surrounding the famed evangelist, but about her life's work.