

“For some time, I had struggled between developing my talents in the field of art and going into full-time evangelistic work,” van DeVenter said, according to hymnologist Kenneth Osbeck in “101 More Hymn Stories.” “At last the pivotal hour of my life came, and I surrendered all. A new day was ushered into my life. I became an evangelist and discovered down deep in my soul a talent hitherto unknown to me. God had hidden a song in my heart, and touching a tender chord, He caused me to sing.”

“I surrender all,/ I surrender all,/ All to thee, my blessed Savior,/ I surrender all.”

In 1896, evangelist song leader and vocalist Winfield S. Weeden put the words to music and the song was published in a book of hymns called “Gospel Songs of Grace and Glory.” Since then, van DeVenter’s song has appeared in hundreds of other hymnals, and its title is on Weeden’s epitaph.

Van DeVenter evangelized throughout the United States, England, and Scotland, visiting art museums along the way. He also had his own radio program called “The Gospel in Song and Story.” Van DeVenter published 60 more hymns, but “I Surrender All” remains the most well-known.

In the 1920s, van DeVenter taught as a professor of hymnology for four years at the Florida Bible Institute, now Trinity Bible College.

After retirement, while still living in the community, van DeVenter frequently returned to the Bible Institute to visit with students and conduct singalongs, according to David P. Bruce, executive assistant to Billy Graham, the uncle of Hillsdale Professor of English John Somerville. Graham met van DeVenter and helped to take care of him.

“We students love this kind, deeply spiritual gentleman and often gathered in his winter home at Tampa, Florida, for an evening of fellowship and singing,” Graham recounted in “Crusade Hymn Stories,” by Cliff Barrows.

Graham said van DeVenter was influential on his earlier preaching and was present at the time of his death on July 17, 1939, in Tampa, Florida.

“And I’ll never forget just before he went to be with God, barely audible but we could hear it, he sang, ‘All to Jesus I surrender,’” Graham said in May 1958, according to the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. “He went to be with Christ with a smile on his face, looking forward to seeing Christ.”

Van DeVenter returned home for burial in Dundee’s Maple Grove Cemetery, and Graham carried on van DeVenter’s story by popularizing “I Surrender All” at his revivals.

“All to Jesus I surrender,/ Humbly at his feet I bow,/ Worldly pleasures all forsaken,/ Take me, Jesus, take me now.”

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