



Topeka Bahá'í Archives

BAHÁ'Í REGIONAL CONFERENCE

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## THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH IN KANSAS, 1897-1947

by Duane L. Herrmann

*About the year 1900, Abraham Keihrella [sic], an Egyptian, came to Enterprise, Kansas. Mrs. Rose Hilty was residing there at the time. Mr. Kheihrella brought his wife and son from Chicago to Enterprise for a vacation. While there, he gave the Baha'i Message including ordinances and instructions. And healed some people while there. He also organized a group of forty members in Enterprise before leaving.<sup>1</sup>*

*The Beginning:* The city of Enterprise was the first place in Kansas where Bahá'í activities were organized. Bahá'í classes were held there in 1897, and Bahá'ís have been in Kansas continuously ever since. Bahá'í communities that were later formed in Kansas have connections to that first Enterprise Bahá'í community.

At the end of the nineteenth century, Enterprise was much more important than it is today. A railroad town located on the Smokey Hill River, it was a commercial and industrial center for central Kansas. The river provided abundant energy for the technology of the times. A college was established there in 1888, and the first kindergarten in Kansas was also founded there. Leading national figures, including



BARBARA HILTY EHRSAM

Susan B. Anthony, Carrie Nation (who “smashed” a saloon on her visit), and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, visited the town during these years.

It was among the social elite of Enterprise—among its founders, in fact—that the Bahá'í Faith would be introduced. The city had been founded by Christian Hoffman, Jacob Ehrsam, and Michael Senn. All were immigrants from Switzerland. Hoffman had owned and operated a mill in Switzerland and wanted to do the same in the new country. He enlisted the help of Ehrsam to build the mill and forge its machinery. Barbara, Elizabeth, and Michael Senn had come to the United States from Switzerland with their parents in 1854 or 1855, and settled in Kansas. Elizabeth Senn married Christian Hoffman there.<sup>2</sup>

Barbara Senn had married Joseph Hilty, another Swiss immigrant, in Kansas in 1860. When he died in 1868, Barbara and her children, Leonard and Josephine Hilty, joined her sister and brother-in-law (the Hoffmans) who were moving to Loudon Falls to build the grain mill. Barbara's brother, Michael Senn, also moved there, and together they opened the first store in the area. The new town of Enterprise was platted around the store about a year later. In 1870, Barbara Hilty married Jacob Ehrsam, who had helped to build the Hoffman mill and had later opened his own machine shop. The Ehrsams had six children, plus the two from Barbara's previous marriage. In 1890, to house the family, they built a new home that the newspaper described as the “most elegant . . . in town.”<sup>3</sup>

With the store, the machine shop, and the mill, the Hoffman-Ehram-Senn families prospered and dominated the economy of Enterprise. In 1885, the newspaper delighted in the prosperity of the town, reporting that “the J. B. Ehrsam Machine Company has secured contracts worth nearly \$75,000 in a single week.”<sup>4</sup> But this material success did not satisfy

Barbara Ehrsam. Her religious speculations became well known. She was described as someone who went "from one church and dogma to another."<sup>5</sup> At different times, she investigated Christian Science, the Dowieites (followers of John Alexander Dowie, centered in Zion City, Illinois), and the teachings of a vegetarian who had walked barefoot from Chicago.<sup>6</sup> These activities "so incensed her brother-in-law John that he publicly read her from membership in the Methodist Church as one of his last acts before leaving his pulpit at Enterprise."<sup>7</sup>

Ehrsam's religious interests appear to have been shared by her daughter, Josephine Hilty (Kimmel). In the 1890s, she went to Chicago to complete her musical training. There she met Ibrahim Kheiralla, the famous Bahá'í teacher and accepted his teachings.<sup>8</sup> She probably attended Kheiralla's classes in Chicago, but she did not receive the Greatest Name there—the culmination of Kheiralla's instruction.<sup>9</sup> It seems that Hilty shared her discovery with her mother. Barbara Ehrsam invited Kheiralla to come to her home and offer his teachings there. He brought his wife, Marian, and his teenage son, George. Marian Browne, Marian Kheiralla's aunt, may also have accompanied them. It was the first time that Kheiralla's lessons had been delivered outside of Chicago.<sup>10</sup>

Kheiralla was not the first person or the last to whom Barbara Ehrsam would turn for spiritual knowledge, but his visit caused quite a stir in Enterprise and the surrounding communities. The news of Kheiralla's new teachings quickly spread to Abilene (the closest town), to Topeka (the capital city), and beyond to Lawrence, one hundred miles from Enterprise. The articles in the newspapers of these cities, in 1897, may have been the first publicity that Bahá'í activities in America ever received.

Kheiralla arrived in Enterprise in early July, 1897. By the fifteenth of the month, articles about him had appeared

in newspapers across the state. The articles focused on Kheiralla's healing techniques, the unusual ideas presented in his classes, and the secrecy that surrounded them. A detailed examination of these articles is necessary to understand the public reaction to the Bahá'í teachings and the long-term impact of Kheiralla's visit.

The *Abilene Weekly Chronicle* of July 16, published at the county seat ten miles from Enterprise, carried an article under the headline:

TEACHES STRANGE THINGS  
Has Wonderful Power to Heal

The article reads:

Considerable interest and a little excitement prevails in Enterprise these days over the peculiar religious teaching of one "Dr." Ibrahim [sic] G. Kheiralla an Arabian, who claims not only to teach the only true religion but to possess remarkable powers as a healer of all ills that flesh is heir to.

Dr. Kheiralla has written a book in which he sets forth his peculiar religious ideas, which are to a considerable extent fanatical. By some it is called Neo-Platonism, but others pronounced a combination of Arabic mysticism, German rationalism, mesmerism, etc. He believes in the individuality of God, that the Creator is not the universe or the universe the Creator. The resultant is a modified form of Pantheism.

He has two systems of teaching, giving public lectures on Sunday evening and private lessons in which he teaches the mysteries of the religion, on Wednesday evenings. There must be no interruption, no queries and arguments. Last night a number of Abilene people heard the lecture.

An inner circle, or class formed to take the advanced course in the Kheiralla religion, already has several members, including it is said C. V. Topping, Ed Hafner, etc. Miss Josie Hilty, who knew the "Doctor" in Chicago and through whose influence he was induced to visit Enterprise, is said to have embraced the doctrine he teaches. Just what this is no one is able to find out without acceptance thereof.

The alleged performance of one or two remarkable cures, due to gifts resulting from his religious views, has added somewhat to Dr. Kheiralla's power. One of the Ehram boys had the colic or something of the kind and was cured by the laying on of the "Doctor's" hands, one being placed back of his head and the other on his abdomen. Another case, that of a little girl named Hilty, who has been blind from birth, is reported in which he has so far benefited her that she can now distinguish light from darkness and note the difference in colors.

Dr. Kheiralla claims to be able to cure everything and is credited with a host of remarkable cures of all kinds of chronic diseases, including consumption, kidney troubles, fevers, etc., by hypnotic or mesmeric influences, aided by medicines whose secret powers are known to him only.<sup>11</sup>

The book referred to in the article is Kheiralla's *Bab-ed-Din*, and the assessment of his teachings is based on the lessons published in that booklet. This article provides one of the fullest descriptions of Kheiralla's healing methods. This same article appeared simultaneously in two Topeka newspapers, one gave credit to the *Abilene Chronicle*, the other simply gave it a dateline of "Enterprise."<sup>12</sup>

One reason for the wide distribution of this news can be found in the headline given to this article in a Topeka newspaper. The *Topeka Daily Capital* ran the report on the top of page three with the headline: HOFFMAN'S NEW RELIGION. The subheader explains: "The people found out what ails Agricultural College Regent." C. B. Hoffman was the son of Christian Hoffman, Barbara Ehram's brother-in-law and the owner of the Hoffman mills in Enterprise. He was a prominent state figure with high ambitions and later became an important politician in Kansas. He eventually ran for governor of the state and narrowly lost. The reports that he was attending Kheiralla's classes caused reprints of this article to appear around the state.

On July 17, the Enterprise weekly paper published an

article headed: THE BIBLE IS NOT THE TRUTH. This article, dealing as it did with the town's most prominent families, was less critical than the Abilene article:

Dr. I. G. Kheiralla, Chicago, who is spending his vacation with the family of J. B. Ehram, is teaching the people of Enterprise the religion of his order. Dr. Kheiralla was sent by his Order from the Orient to this country to teach "the truth" and has a large following in Chicago where he has resided since coming to this country from Egypt. He teaches the Oneness and Singleness of God: also whence we came, why we are here and where we are going. He gives to his private pupils the key to the sealed books of the Bible which he uses to verify his teachings. He believes the truth is in the Bible but that the Bible is not the truth.

One of the strict rules of his order is that no teacher is allowed to accept any remuneration [sic], directly or indirectly, for teaching the truth; neither is any one allowed to teach unless a most thorough investigation has been made and every statement which they make can be proved.

On Sunday evenings there will be public talks given in the parlors of the Ehram residence, to which all are invited. The private classes which have been held twice, meet Tuesday and Friday afternoons and evenings. There are twenty-seven people taking the private teachings and another class will be formed later. A great interest is manifested by those who have begun the teachings of this religion of which so little is said, for the name of the order is only revealed to those who have taken all the teachings.<sup>13</sup>

This description of the classes, both in manner and content, is accurate and is again partially based on *Bab-ed-Din*. Kheiralla did not tell anyone the "name of the order" (the Bahá'í Faith) until they had completed all the classes.

This article, with additional comments at the beginning and end, was reprinted the following Friday in the Abilene weekly. The final comment, a disclaimer the Abilene editors found appropriate, read: "Nobody, however, will take much stock in a religion which cannot stand the open light of day





THE NEW EHRSAM HOUSE  
in Enterprise, Kansas, c. 1890.

and Kheiralla's 'religion' is perhaps as great a fake as his alleged miraculous cures."<sup>14</sup> This barb, of course, refers to Kheiralla's insistence on secrecy.

This sarcastic approach can be seen earlier in a short quip that appeared in the *Reflector*, dated July 15, 1897: "It is reported that C. B. Hoffman is practicing under an Arabian doctor in the art of curing by laying on of hands. Chris will probably add this new department to the State Agricultural college when he masters it more thoroughly."<sup>15</sup>

Hoffman's prominence and his advocacy of radical changes at the college (now Kansas State University), located just thirty miles from his hometown, guaranteed attention for his activities. The next day, another short feature was printed in the *Daily Reflector*, but this time with a dateline of the *Lawrence Journal*: "It is reported from Enterprise, Kansas, that C. B. Hoffman, the man who has been playing hammer and eggs with the Agricultural College, is a member of a new religious sect organized out there by a gentleman by the name of Ibrahim Kheiralla, late of Arabia. The religion is said to be a conglomeration of mysticism, rationalism, and mesmerism. With wheels of that kind in his head it is no wonder Hoffman wants to grind things up."<sup>16</sup> The last line, no doubt, was intended as a sarcastic reference to the Hoffman family mill, as well as to the controversies at the college.

Ironically, there is no clear evidence that Hoffman actually attended any of Kheiralla's classes. His name does not appear on any of the surviving lists of students attending the classes in Enterprise. If he did attend, it is likely that he dropped out after the adverse publicity.

With the newspaper articles, it is sufficient to say that the arrival of the Bahá'í Faith in Enterprise did not go unnoticed. Kheiralla was interviewed by a newspaper reporter while in Topeka.<sup>17</sup> But in spite of the skeptical reception by the press in other parts of the state, it appears that Kheiralla

and his family were well received in Enterprise and enjoyed a peaceful vacation. A few weeks after the initial commotion, the following lines appeared in the Enterprise paper: "Ed Hafner, Emmett Hoffman and George Kheiralla are with a camping party on Lyons Creek, near Woodbine, and will fight chiggers and misquitos [sic] for a week."<sup>18</sup> This was a typical social notice.

The next week the Enterprise paper duly noted: "Dr. Kheiralla has a large class taking lectures in the new religion and the meetings are reported to be very interesting."<sup>19</sup> It was now just another part of the summer. Kheiralla and his family left Enterprise on August 25.

*Bahá'ís in Enterprise:* Rose Hilty, one of those who attended Kheiralla's classes, recalled many years later that he had left some forty Bahá'ís in Enterprise after the summer of 1897.<sup>20</sup> This is probably an overstatement, however. The newspapers had reported only twenty-seven persons attending classes. Kheiralla himself recalled that twenty-one people became Bahá'ís there, while twenty-two names are found on a list of Enterprise residents who wrote "supplications" to 'Abdu'l-Bahá declaring their faith in the new religion.<sup>21</sup> This list does not include Josephine Hilty Kimmel, but her name appears on the list of those who were invited to the classes.<sup>22</sup> There is also a list of people from other towns in Kansas who were invited to the classes.<sup>23</sup> Thus we can account for twenty-four of the twenty-seven students mentioned in the newspaper article.

It is likely that some of the twenty-seven students had dropped out of the Bahá'í classes early on. Hoffman, the college regent, may have been one of these. So it seems clear that no more than twenty-four or twenty-five people completed Kheiralla's course before he left Enterprise, though

there may have been others that showed interest in his teachings. That number was soon to diminish, however.

For some reason, Kheiralla did not deliver the Greatest Name to any of those who had become Bahá'ís while he was in Enterprise. This, in itself, was not unusual; he did not always have his students receive the Greatest Name immediately after their completion of the classes. In Chicago, he sometimes waited until there was a larger group to receive it. There is evidence to indicate that some of the students in Enterprise had not taken all the lessons. Ed Haffner, for instance, was out of town for a week while the classes were being given. The newspapers had mentioned that a second class was to be organized, but if it was started while Kheiralla was in the town, he certainly did not have time to finish it. There was just enough time to complete the first class.

At the end of Kheiralla's classes, he would provide new believers in his teachings with a form letter, a "supplication" to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, which was to serve as a model for the letters they were expected to write prior to joining the community. This would often result in a link of correspondence between 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the new Bahá'í. This did not happen in Enterprise. Those who may have sent letters to 'Abdu'l-Bahá received no reply. It is possible that the letters never reached the Holy Land.<sup>24</sup> In any case, no personal contact with 'Abdu'l-Bahá was established, and the Bahá'ís remained dependent on Kheiralla and other Bahá'í teachers.

According to Barbara Ehrsam, Kheiralla had planned to send Thornton Chase to Enterprise to provide additional instruction to the Bahá'ís and to give them the Greatest Name.<sup>25</sup> Chase was unable to go, but he did correspond with one of the Bahá'ís there, John J. Abramson, the son of a cousin of Jacob Ehrsam.<sup>26</sup> In a letter dated April 1898, Chase instructed Abramson on how to give the Bahá'í lessons.<sup>27</sup> He also responded to his queries about the Greatest Name, confirming

that the Enterprise Bahá'ís still did not have it. In October of 1898, Elizabeth Rychener, one of those in the original class, was still looking for someone to deliver the Greatest Name to her.<sup>28</sup>

Two letters survive from Barbara Ehrsam, written to Kheiralla's secretary, Maud Lamson, nearly two years after he left Enterprise. On May 3, 1899, she wrote: "This is the first time I attempted to write to you, although I wished to have done so many times since I had the teachings which make a bond of unity between us." Her health explains the delay: "I have been very ill for nearly two years but have now gained much strength the last 3 weeks that I have hopes of becoming well again."<sup>29</sup>

She continues: "We are a little band of believers here but have no one to instruct us." She goes on to ask if the Getsingers might stop in Enterprise on their way back from pilgrimage in 'Akká to California. (Her request came too late.) Then she asks: "What became of Mr. Chase? He used to write to one of the believers here but no one has heard lately." She is also anxious to receive a copy of Kheiralla's book, which had not been published in 1897. She greatly desires a copy of it, something to study from. She concludes her letter with a gentle reminder: "You promised in the letter to my daughter to send her, also Mrs. Hilty in Enterprise, a copy of Mrs. Getsinger's letter and perhaps some of the Dr's, but we have not seen anything of the kind yet and it is nearly 5 weeks ago."<sup>30</sup>

Lamson's reply has not been found. But some of its contents can be inferred from the second letter that Barbara Ehrsam sent to her later in 1899. She repeated her questions about the availability of Kheiralla's book, even offering to pay in advance. It seems that Lamson had suggested that Rose Hilty come to Chicago. Ehrsam writes: "It is now impossible for Mrs. Hilty to come to Chicago, for she had a very

difficult operation performed."<sup>31</sup> Neither could Ehram herself travel that distance, being also ill.

It seems that the Enterprise Bahá'ís were cut off, with few avenues of contact with other believers in the country. Her letter closes with a brief description of Bahá'í life in the town in 1899. "We live close and see one another every day. We talk much about the blessed truth and long to hear and know more . . . 'Oh God give me knowledge, faith, and love' is the desire of my heart at all times. Hoping to hear from you soon, I remain yours for the truth. [signed] Mrs. J. B. Ehram."<sup>32</sup> No reply remains extant.

By May of 1899, Barbara Ehram had received the Greatest Name from her daughter Josephine Kimmel.<sup>33</sup> Seven other Enterprise students are listed on a September 1899 list as having received the Greatest Name, presumably also from Mrs. Kimmel. Elizabeth Rychener is listed in 1899 as one of the persons who received the Greatest Name in Enterprise, but she had actually moved to Ohio by then, providing one of the community's few outside contacts.<sup>34</sup> John Abramson also received it, though he is not marked in the book. These were probably all of the students from Kheiralla's classes that still considered themselves Bahá'ís by this time.

Most of the original students in the Enterprise classes had been a part of the "upper crust" of local society, and about half of them were related to Barbara Ehram in some way. This also characterizes the believers who remained as of 1899. These were: Barbara Ehram; her daughter-in-law, Mrs. Rose Hilty; Miss Julie Ehram; Mr. E. Ehram; Mrs. E. Rychener; C. B. Harding, railroad agent; his wife, Addie; and Elizabeth Frey, wife of the postmaster.<sup>35</sup> The community had no formal organization, there was no systematic teaching activity, and the Faith did not grow much beyond the students who had attended the original 1897 classes.

Beyond its isolation from other Bahá'í communities, there

were other factors that may have contributed to the lack of growth in Enterprise. Barbara Ehram, especially after the death of her sister, Elizabeth Hoffman, was the reigning matron of the city. The Bahá'í Faith had been introduced into an elite social network and could not easily spread to other sectors of the population. In 1919, one observer described the position of the Ehrams and the Hoffmans in Enterprise society:

These rich people naturally would feel that they were superior to the average people in Enterprise, and that the town was too small for them. Thus they would be led to seek new friends of an equal social status and new amusements in larger cities as they travelled [sic]. Whatever the explanation may be, these idiosyncrasies were bound to destroy any influence for good which these leaders might have had among the average, church people of the town, and served to deepen the wide chasm between church and non-church groups in the town.<sup>36</sup>

In addition, the crisis of Kheiralla's defection from the Bahá'í community in 1900, probably added to the confusion and isolation which the Bahá'ís in Enterprise felt.<sup>37</sup> Yet, we have clear evidence that two of the women of the early Enterprise group, Rose Hilty and Elizabeth Frey, continued to regard themselves as Bahá'ís for the rest of their lives. There may have been others, as well, but we have no evidence of their later activities. Since the Enterprise Bahá'ís remained unorganized, the records of the community are minimal.

In addition to these two, one other resident of Enterprise retained her Bahá'í association until her death. Mrs. Mary M. F. Miller and her husband returned to Enterprise in 1903. He had been the founding minister of the Methodist church years before.<sup>38</sup> At the time of Kheiralla's class, they had lived in Kansas City (Kansas), and her name is found on a list of individuals from various towns in Kansas (presumably to be invited to the class). She was listed as a Bahá'í in Kansas City in 1898. She and Frey were among the few Bahá'ís in

the 1897 group not related to the Hoffman-Ehrsam-Senn family. She is known to have contributed to the Bahá'í Temple project.<sup>39</sup> In 1905, she and Rose Hilty signed a petition to 'Abdu'l-Bahá. They were the only Kansas Bahá'ís to do so, and their names appear in a booklet, published with 'Abdu'l-Bahá's reply, among those of the 422 Bahá'ís who signed the petition. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Tablet encouraged the Bahá'ís to spiritualize their lives, be united, teach the Faith, and promote the unity of mankind.<sup>40</sup> Miller's obituary appeared in the Bahá'í magazine *Star of the West* when she died in 1911: "Word came to us announcing the death of Mrs. Mary M. F. Miller, Enterprise, Kansas after a stroke of paralysis."<sup>41</sup>

A few years before Miller's death, Rose Hilty had moved to Topeka (c. 1905-1906), though her husband did not sell their farms on the edge of Enterprise. With both of these believers gone, the only remaining Bahá'ís in Enterprise may have been Elizabeth Frey and her daughter Elisabeth Renwanz. In 1912, they witnessed the dedication of the ground for the future Bahá'í House of Worship in Wilmette, Illinois. Renwanz wrote: "In May, 1912, attracted by the presence of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, mother and I went to Chicago to see Him. Here we partook but for a moment of the great privilege of meeting the Mystery of God. We also saw him place the cornerstone of the Baha'i Temple."<sup>42</sup> Shortly after the trip, a contribution is recorded from her to the Bahai Temple Unity.<sup>43</sup>

Renwanz had not attended the 1897 classes because she was a girl of ten at the time. She seems to have learned of the Faith through her mother's teaching efforts. Helen Erickson, a long-time resident of Enterprise, remembered that religious meetings were held, when she was a child, at the home of Mrs. Frey.<sup>44</sup> Renwanz described her mother as one of "only two of this group [the 1897 class] who accepted Baha'u'llah as the Manifestation and to remain faithful to the end."<sup>45</sup> The other would have been Rose Hilty.

Hilty returned briefly to Enterprise around 1917, which



may have prompted some Bahá'í activity there. Both Frey and Hilty contributed to the Bahai Temple Unity from Enterprise that year, as did Barbara Ehrsam.<sup>46</sup> Hilty moved back to Topeka in 1920.

After the death of Frey (April 9, 1930) and the departure of her daughter, we can conclude that the Bahá'í community of Enterprise ceased to exist. Considering the social distance between the Bahá'ís and the rest of society and the lack of support from Bahá'ís in other parts of the United States, it is not surprising that the community was unable to grow after an initial period of interest and could not sustain itself.<sup>47</sup>

*Topeka, 1906-1931.* Rose Hilty and her family moved from Enterprise to Topeka in 1905 or 1906. Mrs. Hilty had attended Kheiralla's classes in Enterprise with her husband, but only she had received the Greatest Name and become a Bahá'í. She was able to pass on her Bahá'í identity to her daughter, Lovelia, who was blind from birth—the "little girl named Hilty" mentioned in the 1897 newspaper article as having been partially cured by Kheiralla's healing.

These were the first Bahá'ís to live in Topeka, and Bahá'ís have lived in the city continuously since their arrival. Rose Hilty states in her memoirs that she "helped to organize a group of about 12 or 14 people in the year 1912," and that, "during the years from 1918 to 1925 study classes were held." But it seems that "in time the interest lagged and only 2 or 3 loyal believers succeeded in keeping the group alive. They were Mrs. Hilty, her daughter Lovelia and Miss Bertha Hyde, who later married Prof. Kirkpatrick . . ."<sup>48</sup>

Considering her experience among the Enterprise Bahá'ís, it seems unlikely that Rose Hilty would have initiated any Bahá'í activities in Topeka. It is more likely that she supported the work of Bertha Hyde, the second Bahá'í to live in the city. Hyde came to Topeka in 1908 to keep house for her



### THE EHRSAM-HOFFMAN-SENN FAMILY, c. 1915.

Standing on stairs: Paul Ehrsam (child), Arnold Ehrsam\*. Standing: Arthur Hoffman, Miss Eberhardt, Leonard Hilty\*, unknown, Elsbeth Ehrsam\*, Alma Hoffman, Catherine America Hoffman, Elsbeth Hoffman, Edward Kuster, Jessie Wagner, Mable Cutler Hoffman, Lovelia Hilty (with glasses), Hattie Grosser, Anna Hoffman, Christian Hoffman, Ralph Hoffman, Jacob B. Ehrsam, William J. Ehrsam\*, Vergiline Mulvane Ehrsam, Rev. Blaney (of Abilene), Michael Senn, Marie Senn Heath\*, Josephine Hilty Kimmel (Abramson). Kneeling left: Senn Heath (child). Seated: Hortense Ehrsam, Viola Hare Ehrsam, Barbara Senn Hilty Ehrsam\* (in black), Iona Senn Moulton\*, Barbara Ehrsam (child), Rose Hilty\*, Josephine Senn\*. Kneeling left (with infant): Julia Ehrsam Kuster\*. Children in front: Catherine Kuster (infant), Herbert Chase, Josephine Heath (kneeling), Catherine Johntz (in front), John Ehrsam, Hal Heath, James Ehrsam, Herbert Ehrsam, Chase Ehrsam (with toy trumpet), David Mulvane Ehrsam, John Hoffman Johntz (in front), William J. Ehrsam, Jr. Those marked with asterisks attended Bahá'í classes in Enterprise in 1897. Josephine Hilty (Kimmel Abramson), Barbara (Senn Hilty) Ehrsam,

widowed brother, Dr. Arthur Hyde, and his young son. She had attended Holyoke College and worked as a school teacher in the East. She was eventually to return to teaching in Topeka, finding a job as a science teacher at Central Park Elementary School.

Bertha Hyde first learned of the Bahá'í Faith from her sister, Mabel Hyde Paine, of Urbana, Illinois. Her sister had attended classes on the Faith given by Albert Vail, a Unitarian minister in Urbana who was a Bahá'í. Paine became a Bahá'í in 1915, and it is likely that her sister followed her shortly after.<sup>49</sup> As was common at that time, when Bertha Hyde accepted the Faith, she wrote to 'Abdu'l-Bahá to confess her new belief. A Tablet (letter) from him, addressed to her and to several other individuals, promised "a spiritual victory."<sup>50</sup> The date of her entry into the Faith is not known, but in any case Bertha Hyde must have been a believer by 1918, since Rose Hilty states that she was the person who organized the Bahá'í classes in Topeka in that year.<sup>51</sup>

During those early years, it is known that several Bahá'í teachers visited Topeka. They included Charles Mason Remy, Mary Hanford Ford, Ida Finch, George Latimer, Albert Vail, Mabel Paine, and a certain Mr. Powell. A list of these names was kept, but no other details of their activities were recorded.<sup>52</sup>

In 1917, Bertha Hyde joined over a thousand other American Bahá'ís who signed a petition requesting that 'Abdu'l-Bahá return to the United States. Hyde was the only Bahá'í in Kansas to sign the petition. Rose Hilty was, at the time, back in Enterprise. Also on the list appears the name "Elizabeth Rennwanz," with the Bahá'ís of Grand Rapids, Michigan.<sup>53</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá replied that he was planning his next teaching trip to India, but this never took place.

In May of 1919, Albert Vail reported to the Second Bahá'í Teaching Convention of the Central States, held in Wilmette, the news "of the new and joyous groups started this winter

in Keokuk, Kansas City, Topeka and Omaha."<sup>54</sup> For Topeka, this is, no doubt, a reference to the new study classes. Later Rose Hilty recalled:

During the years from 1918 to 1925 study classes were held under the leadership of Mrs. Bertha Hyde Kirkpatrick. Meetings were held at the home of Mrs. Hilty and at times also at the Universal Truth Center, 504 West 10th Street. Members of this class during this time were—Mrs. Rose Hilty, Miss Lovelia Hilty, Miss Bertha Hyde, Mr. and Mrs. L. M. Kraege, H. R. Whittlesey, Miss Susan Whittlesey, Mrs. Margaret Williams, Mrs. Etta Trump, Mrs. Nellie Amos, Mrs. Etta Gilmore, Miss Anna Boyd, Miss Jennie Boyd.<sup>55</sup>

Also in 1919, a Tablet from 'Abdu'l-Bahá addressed to an individual was received in Kansas. It was translated by Shoghi Effendi and sent to "Ruth Klos" in Atchison. Ruth Klostermeier was a high school student, and her father owned a hardware store in town.<sup>56</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote, in part: "Thou has written that 'I am not worthy.' Who is worthier than thee? Hadst thou not been worthy, thou wouldst not have turned to God and wouldst not have wished to enter the Kingdom. Thy worthiness has guided thee until this blessing and bounty have encompassed thee."<sup>57</sup>

The Bahá'í community in Topeka that emerged from the activities of Bertha Hyde and the Hiltys appears to have been a loose network of individuals interested in the study of the Bahá'í teachings—most of whom also had other metaphysical interests and pursuits. There was no formal membership in the community, and many of those involved in Bahá'í activities were also active in churches and other religious movements, as was normal for the time.<sup>58</sup> For example, Louis M. Kraege, in addition to his job as Secretary of the Independent Telephone Company, was a prominent member of the Universal Truth Center in Topeka and served as its president. Margaret Williams, another Bahá'í, was the li-

brarian of the Metaphysical Library. The library was housed in her home, as was the Universal Truth Center, where the Bahá'í study classes were sometimes held.<sup>59</sup> Rose Hilty, in time, drifted into involvement with a "Mazdean" (Zoroastrian) philosophy. She spent many hours copying "Sutras" for the well-being of the world.<sup>60</sup>

It seems clear that the Bahá'í study group in Topeka, during the late 1910s and early 1920s, was a part of the metaphysical culture of the city. This culture promoted an "inclusivist" approach to all religions. It is apparent that many of the Bahá'ís of Topeka did not regard the Bahá'í Faith as an organized, independent religion which required their exclusive commitment. Albert Vail, who helped to organize the meetings in Topeka,<sup>61</sup> was himself a practicing Unitarian minister.

As a result of these attitudes, there was little attendance at the Nineteen-Day Feast and Bahá'í Holy Day observances in Topeka. Even though fourteen Bahá'ís were listed as members of the study group, there was not enough interest to form a local Spiritual Assembly. Even with similar obstacles, the Urbana (Illinois) Bahá'í Assembly was formed in 1920. Mable Hyde Paine came to Topeka to help her sister with the Bahá'í work, but they could not do much.<sup>62</sup>

Some of the tension between the metaphysical approach and a more orthodox understanding of the Bahá'í teachings surfaced during the visit of Faḍl-i Mazandarání (Mírzá Asadu'lláh Mazandarání) to Topeka in 1920. 'Abdu'l-Bahá had sent Jináb-i Faḍil (as he was known) to America to travel to as many Bahá'í communities as possible. His mission was to strengthen ties among the Bahá'ís, educate them more fully in the teachings, and proclaim the Bahá'í message to the public. His successful tour was much celebrated in the Bahá'í community.<sup>63</sup>

The Bahá'ís had arranged for Faḍil to give a number of

public lectures in Topeka. The topics included: "Self-Mastery," "The Ideals of the New Age," and "The Teachings of All Religions Are Identical." There is no hint in any of the titles of the Bahá'í Faith as a religion.<sup>64</sup> Indeed, the word *Bahá'í* is not even mentioned. Nor is it found in the ads that Bahá'ís used to publicize these meetings.<sup>65</sup> Faḍil was scheduled to speak at Central Congregational Church in the city. The announcement in the newspaper's church section read: "CONGREGATIONAL—Central, Evening Sermon, 'The Religion and Reality of Jesus Christ.' by Janebie Fazel Masandarani [sic]."<sup>66</sup>

Faḍil arrived in Topeka from Lincoln, Nebraska, on the evening of December 18, 1920. He left on December 21. He stayed in the home of Mrs. Matt Weightman. While she was supportive of the Bahá'í Cause and had helped make arrangements for the visit, she could not make a firm commitment to the Faith. She was the wife of a Kansas legislator and a cousin of George Latimer, a prominent Bahá'í—frequently elected member of the Bahai Temple Unity and, later, of the National Spiritual Assembly. A reception for Faḍil was held in the Weightman home on the evening of his arrival. The ministers of two important churches in the neighborhood were invited: Rev. Klup of the First Methodist Church and Rev. Rayhill of Central Congregational.<sup>67</sup> It was the latter in whose church Faḍil was to deliver the evening sermon in his church the next day.

A newspaper article published just after Faḍil's arrival states: "Professor Fazel, who is a Christian, has two purposes in his tour, that of lecturing on the doctrines of universal peace, universal religion, which is the Christian religion . . ."<sup>68</sup> The article contains a number of other details about Faḍil which are accurate and could only have been provided by the Bahá'ís.

The impression given out that Faḍil could be considered a Christian was soon dispelled by Faḍil himself. After the reception at the Weightman home, his sermon at the church

was hastily cancelled. His talk on the reality of Christ was later delivered at a theater rented by the Bahá'ís.<sup>69</sup> The reason for the cancellation is not recorded, but it seems likely that Rev. Rayhill, a new and inexperienced minister, had learned more about the religion of Jináb-i Faḍil.

An article published the day after the reception is virtually identical to the one mentioned above, except that it clearly states that Faḍil is a Bahá'í: "Persecution by the Turks was the lot of Professor Masandarani [sic] when he accepted his Faith, known as the Baha'i movement."<sup>70</sup>

One of Faḍil's talks was given at the Metaphysical Library, where he was well received. One member of the audience commented: "I have always felt that too many missionaries are sent to the Orient, but am delighted to realize that now missionaries are coming from the Orient to give us knowledge and wisdom."<sup>71</sup> The president of the organization, also a member of the Bahá'í study group, announced to all that the "Library contains a *full* set of Bahai literature and a good deal for sale; that anyone can borrow or buy or come there and read their books."<sup>72</sup>

Rose Hilty had returned to Topeka in time for Faḍil's visit. She and her daughter, Lovelia, had helped to organize it.<sup>72</sup> His lectures resulted in more public exposure than the Bahá'í Faith had ever had in Topeka. Bertha Hyde's report to the National Teaching Committee, which had organized the trip, summarized the results: "The meetings I think were well attended when one considers that they were held just a week before Christmas. (Sunday, the 19th, three meetings were held; in the morning at the Metaphysical Library on the 'Master Key to Self-Mastery'; in the afternoon at the Orpheum Theater on 'The Teachings of all Religions are Identical'; and in the evening again at the Orpheum on 'The Religion and Reality of Jesus Christ'.) . . . Mr. Vail talked personally with a number and left a list with me whom I shall

consult with the idea of starting our meetings again. That, I am sure, is very important, and we want prayers for our success. The Monday meetings were at the Elks Club on 'The Ideals of the New Age', and at 8 pm in the Library of Washburn College on 'Modern Education in Persia.'<sup>73</sup> It is notable that Bahá'í meetings had been discontinued some time before Fadil's visit.

If Bertha Hyde succeeded in reestablishing the study group, it did not last long. In 1921, Dr. John Kirkpatrick was dismissed from Washburn College for advocating greater democracy on campus and more power for students and faculty.<sup>74</sup> Arthur Hyde, Bertha's brother, resigned in protest. Brother and sister left for Michigan. Although Bahá'í classes may have been held in Topeka until 1925, and Albert Vail continued his assistance, the Bahá'í community was without leadership. At the National Bahá'í Convention in 1926, Corinne True reported that she had visited the Bahá'ís of Topeka. The need for follow-up teaching and consolidation was emphasized. There is no evidence of any Bahá'í activities in Topeka in the late 1920s, and it was not until the 1930s that such activities were revived.

After leaving Topeka, Arthur and Bertha Hyde kept in touch with John Kirkpatrick. In 1924, John and Bertha were married, but religion remained a point of difference between them. Kirkpatrick was an ordained minister of the Congregational Church. He decided to investigate his wife's religion, but the virulent and distorted information he received from Neale Alter, a missionary colleague in Syria,<sup>75</sup> turned him against the Bahá'í Faith for the rest of his life and divided the family. Still, he could not completely dismiss the Bahá'í religion.

In 1930, Kirkpatrick was dying. He and his wife, Bertha Hyde Kirkpatrick, returned to Topeka to be near his family and his doctor. Although confined to bed, he remained men-



tally alert. He and his wife began to add to their reading and discussion a collection of Bahá'í scriptures her sister was gathering, which was eventually published as *The Divine Art of Living*. Through these writings, he began to understand that his opposition to the Faith was unfounded.

One day, his wife later recounted, "he signified his desire for pencil and paper. Slowly his weakened hand, unable to hold the pencil without aid, formed the almost illegible words, 'one thing only, to be a good . . .' then for a moment there seemed a great influx of strength and spirit as with firm hand he completed the sentence with the word—BAHAI in large clear letters. . . . Those were my husband's last words."<sup>76</sup> He died on January 31, 1931, a newborn Bahá'í.<sup>77</sup>

*Resurrection: Topeka, 1933.* No Bahá'í activities resulted from the Kirkpatrick's return to Topeka in 1930. However, three years later the community was reorganized through the efforts of Orcella Rexford and her husband Dr. Gayne Gregory. Rexford was a professional lecturer who made her living giving talks on such topics as color, diet, and health. Her travels provided her with an opportunity to spread the Bahá'í teachings throughout the country.

May Brown, who attended her lectures in Topeka, recalled:

In about late August 1933 a man came to visit our goat dairy as we were the only ones in town that had an "A" rating. My husband, Paul Brown, had made a nice goat barn, room for cooling and bottling milk in connection with the milking shed, etc. . . .

This man looked things over and asked a few questions, in answer to which he made the following proposition: his wife, Orcella Rexford, would be in town for several days giving lectures on health and if we could furnish them goat milk for the time they were here, she would give us free tickets and reference books she had for sale. As we had plenty of goat milk we agreed.

Orcella's lectures were very interesting and very dramatic . . . After a few nights of lectures Orcella announced that on Sunday

she would give a lecture on religion. Well, being faithful members of the Seabrook Congregational Church, we did not go to that lecture. Then the next night when we went again to her lectures, everyone was telling how shocking her Sunday lecture was. She even said Christ had returned.<sup>78</sup>

The Browns attended the next lecture on religion and became interested in the Bahá'í Faith. At the end of the lectures, they joined twenty-six other people who indicated that they wanted to start a class on the Bahá'í teachings.

Ruth Moffett, a Bahá'í from Chicago, came to Topeka for two weeks as their resident teacher. "She held a series of meetings at the Herron Studio, 625 Kansas Ave. Three meetings a day were held there until Nov. 5 covering a period of 15 days. Forty-six lectures in all were given covering prayer services, conferences and luncheons. At the end of these series twenty-six people made declaration of their intention to go on with the study of the Bahá'í Movement."<sup>79</sup>

Moffett returned later in the month and a meeting was held in the home of Mr. and Mrs. L. M. Kraege. The Kraeges were long-time Bahá'ís who had been members of Hyde's study class in the 1920s. At this meeting, Moffett organized new classes under the name "Baha'i Fellowship."<sup>80</sup> She brought her own "Book of Life" for the new believers to sign, affirming their belief. She could remain this time for only two days, but promised to return in the spring.

The Topeka Baha'i Fellowship started a library of Bahá'í books. In February of 1934, a delegation from the group visited Rose Hilty, now an invalid, to obtain information from her about the early days of the Faith in Kansas. Shortly after this, Hilty donated all of her Bahá'í books and magazines to the Bahai Fellowship. These included a complete set of *Star of the West* which she had collected and preserved through the years. Hilty died a few months later.

At this point, the status of the Baha'i Fellowship was

somewhat ambiguous. Those involved clearly regarded themselves as Bahá'ís, and they had signed Moffett's book, but their names do not seem to have been on any national Bahá'í membership list. At Ridván (April 21) of 1934, they elected a local Spiritual Assembly, at Moffett's behest. At the meeting, however, the community first gathered and elected officers. Then committees were organized. After that, they elected the Assembly. This was a continuation of some elements of the Bahá'í practices of the early 1920s, which the Kraeges may have remembered, but it was out of step with the Bahá'í Administration of the 1930s. The Bahá'ís of Topeka clearly saw the local Assembly as an instrument of the Bahá'í community, and not its governing body. Notification of the election of the Assembly and the election of community officers was sent to the Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Chicago. (Chicago had acted as a regional center in the 1920s.) The Chicago Bahá'ís replied with their congratulations, but news of the elections never reached the National Spiritual Assembly, so the Local Spiritual Assembly of Topeka was not recognized.

Some years later, members of the Topeka group explained how the election of the Assembly had come about: ". . . it is generally thought that we were prematurely organized. As a study group, we were given to understand that were we organized this would sort of put us on the map, so to speak, and many Bahá'ís passing through Topeka would most likely stop over to give us some help, but this has not been the case."<sup>81</sup>

During the following year (1934-35), at least two Bahá'í traveling teachers visited Topeka, Mamie Seto and Ali Kuli Khan. There was some press coverage of Khan's visit.

In preparation for the Ridván election of 1935, the National Teaching Committee sent a representative to Topeka to insure that the Assembly was properly formed and recognized. Dr. Morris was in the city from April 9 to April 11. One of her tasks was to have the members of the Baha'i



Topeka Bahá'í Archives

RUTH MOFFETT (second from left)  
with the Bahá'ís of Topeka, Kansas, c. 1935.

Fellowship Group sign Bahá'í declaration cards in order to establish a definite membership list. May Brown later recalled that: "We all became Baha'is again."<sup>82</sup> Twenty-one people were willing to sign the new cards. From this base, the local Assembly was elected. Moffett returned to oversee the Assembly election. The elected members were: Mr. Paul Brown, Mrs. Irena Stevens, Mrs. Mae Minor, Mrs. Irma Coburn, Mr. Louis Kraege, Miss Ruth Stevens, Mrs. Amos, Miss Tegart, Mrs. Mae Stone.<sup>83</sup>

During Moffett's visit, she had spent much of her time with individuals who had not signed the declaration cards offered by Morris a couple of weeks before. She eventually allowed four of these "undeclared Bahá'ís" to vote in the election. This caused resentment among some of the other members of the group, since they felt that these people had no real commitment to the Faith. One of the four was elected to the Assembly and became its treasurer, however, which indicates that the resentment was not unyielding or universal. The conflict on the Assembly was serious enough, however, that the treasurer had resigned her office by June. She gradually stopped attending Assembly meetings, and eventually refused to associate with any of the Bahá'ís at all.

Those on the other side of the conflict felt that the problems were all the treasurer's fault. According to one member of the community, she "undertook to run everything—until we were smashed . . ." Most of the Bahá'ís became inactive as a result of these problems. By the end of the year, there were only six or seven believers coming to meetings. The recording secretary of the Assembly later reported: "After the hurricane was over, six or seven of the original workers shook off the debris and quietly began to hold steady—and build . . . Now for a number of months, since August [1935]—we've been gaining our former peace and harmony and have made nice progress."<sup>84</sup>

Despite the optimistic face put on the situation in the secretary's report, deep problems remained in the Topeka community. In April of 1936, shortly before the annual election, the community asked a series of questions in a letter to the National Spiritual Assembly. Some of these were: 1) Should non-participating Bahá'ís have the same voice as those who have been involved all along? 2) Should Bahá'ís antagonistic to the community have the same rights as those who are working together? 3) What should be done when someone wants to withdraw from the community? 4) Who is the teacher for this area, and how do we get her to come here?<sup>85</sup> Most of the questions had to do with the relatively new concept of Bahá'í membership. The issue of the proper boundaries of the community would continue to be an issue for some time.

In reply to these questions, Horace Holley, the Secretary of the National Spiritual Assembly, explained that all Bahá'í communities would face tests as they grew, that individuals could not be arbitrarily removed from the membership list for non-attendance or disinterest. If the Assembly wanted to verify its membership, it could gently express that intention in preparation for the annual election and request that each member on the rolls indicate his preference for membership or not.<sup>86</sup>

Apparently, the advice was taken because a new membership list appeared for the 1936 election with several names omitted. Nonetheless, conflict continued among the Bahá'ís in Topeka. It appears that the central problem was that some Bahá'ís regarded the Bahá'í community as primarily a metaphysical study group and little more, while others—responding to the guidance of recent Bahá'í teachers—had come to see the Bahá'í Faith as a distinct religion with an established organization which required their exclusive commitment. And there were Bahá'ís who fell somewhere in between.

After the election of the Topeka Assembly in 1936,

Emogene Hoagg was asked by the National Spiritual Assembly to visit the city to help resolve the problems of the Bahá'í community. Hoagg was a longtime Bahá'í and an important Bahá'í administrator. She had managed the International Bahá'í Bureau in Switzerland from 1928 to 1935 at the request of the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith.

On October 7, 1936, Hoagg arrived in town to learn that the Assembly had not met since its election and her earlier communications had been ignored. She organized study classes to "deepen" the community, but they were poorly attended. She remained in Topeka for four weeks, but found that she could not repair the situation. She reported to the National Spiritual Assembly that the circumstances "would be ludicrous, if not so tragic. Just like children quarreling." Hoagg decided that the community was hopeless. None of the Bahá'ís, she reported, except for Paul and May Brown, had any understanding of the Revelation. Nor had they given up earlier pursuits which she found incompatible with the Bahá'í teachings. They were "children so far as understanding the teachings is concerned. Too, so many things have been taught that have to be unlearned."<sup>87</sup> Clearly Hoagg disapproved of the work of some earlier Bahá'í teachers. She felt that the atmosphere was so impossible that the only solution was to dissolve the Assembly and start over. According to Hoagg, there were several people—including Mrs. Weightman—who were interested in becoming Bahá'ís, but would not join because of the conditions in the community. Nothing could be accomplished under the present circumstances.<sup>88</sup>

The chairman of the National Teaching Committee, with whom Hoagg corresponded, was reluctant to endorse dissolving the Topeka Assembly. With twenty-one Bahá'ís on the rolls, he felt that she should be able to find nine who could carry on the local body. The complications she found in Topeka were similar to those that had arisen in other cities after certain teachers had been sent there.<sup>89</sup>

Hoagg finally succeeded in gathering eleven of the Bahá'ís in the city together to consult on the situation. (No mean feat in itself.) The consensus was that the Assembly should be dissolved. This decision was ratified at the next Nineteen-Day Feast, and a letter sent to the National Assembly. This was the beginning of a flurry of correspondence between the Topeka Bahá'ís, the National Assembly, Emogene Hoagg, and the National Teaching Committee. By the end of January 1937, the National Assembly had decided that "the Cause will best be served by recognizing the dissolution of the Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Topeka." An updated membership list was requested.<sup>90</sup>

Two lists of Bahá'ís were sent in rapid succession, one before the final letter was received and one after. The first list contained only eight names; the second, eleven. Apparently, three members were only willing to be on the list if there was to be no Assembly. After the second list was received, the Topeka Bahá'ís were advised that they should reelect their Assembly at Ridván. They refused. An annual meeting was held on April 21, 1937, however, and fourteen Bahá'ís attended—more than the eleven on the membership list. The boundaries of community membership were still not clear. The meeting elected officers for the community for the next six months. The Bahá'í community was now a study group, as it had been before. In October, officers were elected again, for six months.<sup>91</sup>

In April 1938, the Assembly was reelected, with a representative of the recently created Regional Teaching Committee for Kansas and Missouri present. The official membership list now carried thirteen names.<sup>92</sup>

*The New Bahá'í Community, 1938-1947:* After the Assembly was reestablished in 1938, Bahá'í activities in the town were carried on in a steady and organized way. Study classes were



held each week; Feasts were held regularly; and, the Assembly held its meetings once a month (to study a topic also). Records were kept of each activity and stored in the infant archives. All of these meetings were scheduled in advance for the entire year, and a calendar of events was distributed at the annual meeting. At that meeting, the community historian summarized events of the past year.

One former Bahá'í, a member of the 1933 study group, asked to be reinstated to membership, and two new believers joined the community. All three became active Bahá'ís.

The son of one of the new members later recalled the Bahá'í study classes that his mother attended. He was too young to go to school, so he played under the dining room table which the ladies sat around and would often fall asleep there.<sup>93</sup>

In 1940, a letter was received from the National Spiritual Assembly to all local Assemblies regarding a message recently received from the Guardian. It was time to clarify Assembly boundaries and jurisdictions. The Guardian explained that the boundaries of an Assembly's jurisdiction in every city must correspond to the legal city limits. Bahá'ís living in suburbs and surrounding areas were to be regarded as living in separate Bahá'í communities.<sup>94</sup> In Topeka, the application of this principle caused five members of the Assembly to become isolated believers scattered around Shawnee County (outside the city limits): in North Topeka, Seabrook, and Wakarusa.<sup>95</sup>

In 1941, the Bahá'ís residing within the city limits of Topeka elected their Assembly without the Shawnee County Bahá'ís. That summer, one Assembly member moved to Chicago; and two longtime members who had weathered the storms of the 1930s found this latest change too much and withdrew from the Faith. This brought the community down to nine members. In December, one of the nine died. The

Assembly was lost, the community reverted to "study group" status, and no election was held the next April.<sup>96</sup>

During 1942, however, there were six new enrollments into the Faith: one a youth (a nephew of a Bahá'í), three spouses of Bahá'ís (two lived in the county), and an entirely new couple. It looked as if the Assembly could be restored. But that December, two of the older Bahá'ís died, which meant there would not be nine adult members to form an Assembly. To insure the restoration, the Schulte family of North Topeka moved inside the city limits on April 15, 1943.<sup>97</sup> It was a sacrifice, but the Assembly was reelected.

Eventually, the city annexed the Seabrook neighborhood, and the Browns, who lived there, were once again a part of the Topeka Bahá'í community. They were immediately elected to the Assembly. Most of the community now consisted of stable families. Many of their children became Bahá'ís, then married, and several of their spouses also joined the Faith.

The Bahá'ís of Topeka gradually began to participate in regional and national Bahá'í activities. From 1944 to 1953, a Topeka Bahá'í was always elected as the Kansas delegate to the National Bahá'í Convention in Wilmette. Several others attended the National Convention each year, and some served on the Regional Teaching Committee. Topeka Bahá'ís regularly attended area conferences. A Bahá'í Center was rented in downtown Topeka for many years, and most Bahá'í activities were held there. This was the site of the early Kansas State Conventions.

Eventually, Bahá'ís came to live in other towns and cities across the state. In 1935, a couple moved to Wichita from Topeka. Another family moved to nearby Burlingame in 1943. A Bahá'í with no connection to Topeka was living in Elwood, in the northwest corner of the state, that same year. In 1945, a Topeka Bahá'í married and moved to Fort Leavenworth. Kingsley received its first Bahá'í resident in 1948.



Topeka Bahá'í Archives

**RACE AND WORLD UNITY CONFERENCE**  
held on April 18, 1945, at the Kansan Hotel in Topeka, Kansas. About half of those present were Bahá'ís.

Just before Ridván 1945, the Topeka community held its largest Bahá'í teaching effort to date. A "Race and World Unity" meeting was held on April 18, at the Kansas Hotel. Over thirty-five people—black and white—attended; only about half were Bahá'ís. It was a remarkable event for the time and place.

The next year, the Regional Teaching Committee sponsored the largest all-Bahá'í conference ever held in Kansas. Because of its historic nature, it remained a highlight for those Topeka Bahá'ís who attended. Forty adult Bahá'ís, plus several Bahá'í youth and a number of children attended from Kansas, Missouri, and Nebraska.<sup>98</sup> The Topeka Bahá'ís were impressed and delighted to see so many fellow believers gathered in their hometown. Several of those who attended were family members of early Bahá'ís, making the event all the more special. It was visible evidence that efforts to build a Bahá'í community in Kansas had borne fruit.

*To the Present.*<sup>99</sup> By the end of the 1940s, a conscious, self-perpetuating, and new Bahá'í community had taken shape in Kansas where there had not been one before. The expansion of the community continued in the 1950s. The first Bahá'í wedding took place on October 21, 1950. Bahá'ís established themselves in Emporia (1953), Scott City (1953), Oakley (1955), as well as Manhattan, Hope, and Parsons (1956). Overland Park, Greenleaf, and Merriam were opened to the Faith in 1957, along with Kansas City, where no Bahá'ís had lived since the turn of the century. Local Spiritual Assemblies were formed in Wichita (1955) and Kansas City (1958).

During the 1960s, new Bahá'í communities spread around the state, and two more Assemblies were formed. Bahá'í marriage was made legal by an act of the state legislature, and a Summer Institute was established. The next decade witnessed an explosion in the size of the Kansas Bahá'í community.

New Bahá'í communities emerged in dozens of towns, and Assemblies were formed in nine new cities. The first Kansans were appointed as members of the Auxiliary Board of the Continental Board of Counsellors.

Growth continued in the 1980s. More towns were opened to the Faith, and eight new Assemblies formed. Some Assemblies have been lost, but progress is evident in restoring some that have lapsed and stabilizing their membership.

The Bahá'í Faith is now well established across the state of Kansas, in about one hundred localities. Most counties in the state have resident Bahá'ís, and nearly every town with a population of ten thousand or more has a Bahá'í community. Many Kansas Bahá'ís have gone as pioneers to foreign countries and several have been elected to National Spiritual Assemblies in those countries. Two Kansans have been elected to the Universal House of Justice, the supreme Bahá'í body in Israel. It is not likely that the Kansas Bahá'í community will ever fade away or return to obscurity.

## NOTES

1. This is the report of an interview of Mrs. Rose Hilty, the first Bahá'í of Topeka, with the Topeka Baha'i Fellowship. At the time of the interview, in 1934, the fellowship had been recently established, and Mrs. Hilty was seventy years old. She died within the year. Her recollections were all that the Bahá'ís knew of the beginnings of the Kansas community for the next fifty years. ("History of the Membership in the Topeka Baha'i Community," compiled by May Brown [n.d.] p. 1. Topeka Bahá'í Archives.)

2. Christian Hoffman, "A Brief Life-sketch of Christian Hoffman," unpublished ms., Enterprise Public Library. Edward G. Nelson, *The Company and the Community* (Lawrence, Kan.: Bureau of Business Research, School of Business, University of Kansas, 1956) p. 193.

3. *Enterprise Journal*, October 24, 1890.

4. *The Anti-Monopolist*, May 29, 1885.

5. Nelson, *Company*, p. 312.

6. F. C. Havinghurst, "The Social Development of Enterprise, Kansas" (Master's Thesis. Kansas State University, 1919) p. 39.

7. Nelson, *Company*, p. 312.

8. *Abilene Weekly Chronicle*, July 16, 1897, p. 1.

9. Josephine Hilty was given the Greatest Name in Enterprise in July of 1897. (Membership Book. Chicago House of Spirituality papers, National Bahá'í Archives.) Since the classes that were given in Enterprise were not completed until the end of August, and the Greatest Name was not given to Kheiralla's students until they had completed all the lessons, it seems likely that Hilty had finished his course in Chicago. She is listed in Kheiralla's "Supplication Book of Students in Miscellaneous States" as being the first Bahá'í resident of St. Louis.

On Kheiralla's use of the Greatest Name (*Alláh-u abhá*), see Peter Smith, "The American Bahá'í Community, 1894-1917: A Preliminary Survey," in *Studies in Bábí and Bahá'í History*, Volume One (Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 1982) pp. 90-91; Richard Hollinger, "Ibrahim George Kheiralla and the Bahá'í Faith in America," in *From Iran East and West: Studies in Bábí and Bahá'í History*, Volume Two (Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 1984) pp. 103-105, 110; and Robert H. Stockman, *The Bahá'í Faith in America: Origins, 1892-1900*, Volume One (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1985) pp. 9-11.

10. Hollinger, "Ibrahim George Kheiralla," p. 109. Marian Browne is listed in the Chicago Membership Book (National Bahá'í Archives) as having received the Greatest Name in August 1897. Since Kheiralla was the only one who gave instruction in its use, and he was in Enterprise until August 25, Browne may have been a part of the party.

11. *Abilene Weekly Chronicle* (Abilene, Kansas) July 16, 1897, p. 1. Rose Hilty, Barbara Ehrsam's granddaughter, and the mother of the "little girl named Hilty" referred to in this article, later recalled that Kheiralla had healed people in Enterprise, but she made no mention of him treating her daughter. ("Topeka Bahá'í Community," p. 1.)

12. *Topeka Daily Capitol*, July 14, 1897, p. 3. The weekly newspapers in Enterprise and Abilene credited with the article carried a date two days later (July 16, 1897), but they are the same article. It may be that the weeklies were distributed earlier in the week than the dates printed on them, just as some periodicals are today dated a week or a month before they arrive at the newsstands.

13. *Enterprise Journal* (Enterprise, Kansas) July 15, 1897, p. 1.
14. *Abilene Weekly Chronicle*, July 23, 1897, p. 1.
15. *Abilene Weekly Reflector*, July 15, 1897, p. 6.
16. *Abilene Daily Reflector*, July 16, p. 2.
17. *Topeka Daily Capitol*, September 3, 1897. Clipping in Ibrahim G. Kheiralla papers, in private hands. This article makes no reference to the Bahá'í teachings.
18. *Enterprise Journal*, August 12, 1897, p. 5.
19. *Ibid.*, August 19, 1897, p. 5.
20. See note 1.
21. Ibrahim Kheiralla, *O Christians! Why do Ye Believe Not on Christ?* (Chicago: n.p., 1917) p. 169. Supplications lists, National Bahá'í Archives.
22. "Names and Addresses of people to be notified concerning the classes." Ibrahim Kheiralla papers, in private hands. A check appears by her name on this list, which seems to indicate that she had already taken the course of lessons at the time the list was made up.
23. One name is checked off, Mrs. M. F. Miller of Kansas City. (*Ibid.*) Her husband was a former resident of Enterprise, and it seems likely that she attended the classes there, though it does not appear that she became a Bahá'í until 1898. (*Enterprise Push*, March 1, 1911. Supplications lists.)
24. Letters to Ibrahim Kheiralla from 'Abdu'l-Karim Ṭiḥrání, in Egypt, indicate that hundreds of letters from American Bahá'ís to 'Abdu'l-Bahá were sent through him. Most of these letters do not now appear to be in the Bahá'í World Center Archives.
25. Barbara Ehram to Maude Lamson, May 3, 1899. Maude Lamson papers, National Bahá'í Archives.
26. Abramson had come to live with the Ehram family in 1888, "after a few years in Palestine with a missionary." He was a boy of fifteen at the time, and he spoke German, English, and Arabic fluently. This would have provided Abramson with an opportunity to converse with Kheiralla and his son George in their native language. From Enterprise, he went to college in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, returning to Enterprise to work for Ehram's machine factory. By 1902, he was a stockholder in the company and on the board of directors. He later married Josephine Hilty, and they moved to California. (Nelson, *Company*, p. 293.)
27. Thornton Chase to J. J. Abramson, April 1898. Thornton Chase Papers. National Bahá'í Archives. Wilmette, Illinois.

28. Elizabeth Rychener to Maude Lamson, October 27, 1898. Maude Lamson Papers. National Bahá'í Archives.

29. Barbara Ehrsam to Maude Lamson, May 3, 1899. Maude Lamson papers.

30. Ibid.

31. Barbara Ehrsam to Maude Lamson, n.d. (late 1899). Maude Lamson papers.

32. Ibid. The phrase "O God give me knowledge, faith, and love" is taken from a prayer that Kheiralla gave to his students.

33. Barbara Ehrsam to Maude Lamson, May 3, 1899. Maude Lamson papers.

34. Supplication lists. National Bahá'í Archives.

35. United States Census, 1900.

36. Havinghurst, "Social Development," p. 39.

37. On the defection, see Peter Smith, "The American Bahá'í Community," pp. 96-99 and Richard Hollinger, "Ibrahim George Kheiralla," pp. 116-22.

38. *Enterprise Push*, March 1, 1911, p. 1. Obituary of Mary M. F. Miller.

39. Bahai Temple Unity Ledger Book, October 2, 1909

40. Tablet of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "To the beloved of God in General in America (Upon them be Baha Ullah)," translated by Ali Kuli Khan, January 3, 1906, at Cambridge, Mass. Topeka Bahá'í Archives.

41. *Star of the West* (April 28, 1911) p. 9.

42. "Elizabeth Frey Renwanz Recollections." National Bahá'í Archives.

43. Bahai Temple Unity Ledger Book, dated June 10, 1912.

44. Helen Erikson to Duane L. Herrmann, October 23, 1980. In possession of the author.

45. "Renwanz Recollections."

46. Bahai Temple Unity ledger books. National Bahá'í Archives.

47. See also, Duane L. Herrmann, "Enterprise: Second Oldest . . .?" *Bahá'í News* (March 1987) pp. 6-7.

48. "Topeka Bahá'í Community," p.1.

49. Garetta H. Busey, "Mabel Hyde Paine," in *Bahá'í News* (October 1979) p. 7.

50. Tablet of 'Abdu'l-Bahá addressed to several Bahá'ís in the West, July 24, 1919. Bertha Hyde Kirkpatrick papers. National Bahá'í Archives.

51. "Topeka Bahá'í Community," p. 1.



52. *Ibid.*, pp. 1-2.

53. *Star of the West* (August 1, 1919) p. 161.

54. *Ibid.* (July 13, 1919) p. 132.

55. "Topeka Bahá'í Community," p. 1.

56. *Atchison City Directory*, 1917.

57. *Star of the West* (January 19, 1920) p. 319. This is the only Tablet to an individual Kansas Bahá'í to be published. Other Tablets were received by Fred Hale of Wichita, Mr. P. Dyer (through Fred Hale), and Edward Clark of "America [Americus?], Kansas."

58. It was not until much later, in the mid-1930s, that the Guardian of the Faith asked Bahá'ís in the United States to withdraw from membership in churches and other religious organizations. See Shoghi Effendi, *Messages to America* (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1947) pp. 4-5.

59. *Topeka City Directory*, 1921.

60. Numerous letters to Rose Hilty of various dates in the 1920s from a source that has been obliterated are in possession of the author. Courtesy of Constance Downs, granddaughter of Rose Hilty.

61. At the second Bahá'í Teaching Conference for the Central States in May 1919, he reported a "new and joyous" group started in Topeka. (*Star of the West* [July 13, 1919] p. 132.)

62. Interview of Sylvia Parmalee, conducted by the author on September 2, 1983.

63. *The Bahá'í Centenary: 1844-1944* (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1944) p. 166.

64. *Bulletin "A", Teaching Committee of Nineteen* (January 1921) p. 4. National Bahá'í Archives.

65. *Topeka Daily Capital*, December 19, 1920.

66. *Topeka State Journal*, December 20, 1920, p. 2.

67. *Bulletin "A"*, p. 4.

68. *Topeka Daily Capital*, December 19, 1920, p. 10c.

69. *Bulletin "A"*, p. 4.

70. *Topeka State Journal*, December 20, 1920, p. 4.

71. *Bulletin "A"*, p. 8.

72. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

73. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

74. James F. Zimmerman, "The Washburn Story," unpublished ms. (c. 1960). Washburn University Archives, Topeka, Kansas.

75. S. Neale Alter to John E. Kirkpatrick, January 28, 1924 (written from Hama, Syria). In private hands, courtesy of Sylvia Parmalee.

Alter remained a long-time opponent of the Bahá'í Faith. His antagonistic thesis on the Bahá'í Faith was completed in 1923, at the University of Edinburgh.

76. Mabel H. Paine, "Tribute to Bertha Hyde Kirkpatrick," unpublished ms., p. 3. In private hands, courtesy of Sylvia Parmalee.

77. Bertha Hyde Kirkpatrick returned to her home in Olivet, Michigan. There she helped organize Louhelen Bahá'í School. For years she was the secretary of the School Committee. She was a contributor to, then an editor of, *Star of the West* magazine, and also served as an editor for several volumes of *The Bahá'í World*. She died in 1948, in Michigan. See also, Duane L. Herrmann, "Bertha," *Herald of the South* (July-September, 1991), pp. 46-48.

78. May Brown, "About the Baha'i Faith in Topeka," unpublished ms. (1982), p. 1-2. In private hands.

79. "Topeka Baha'i Community," p. 2.

80. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

81. Maude Tegart, Secretary of the Topeka Bahá'ís, to Horace Holley, December 14, 1936. National Bahá'í Archives.

82. Interview with May Brown conducted by the author (1970s).

83. "Topeka Bahá'í Community," p. 4.

84. Mae Minor to National Spiritual Assembly, April 3, 1936. National Bahá'í Archives.

85. *Ibid.*

86. National Spiritual Assembly to Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Topeka, Kansas, April 8, 1936. National Bahá'í Archives.

87. Emogene Hoagg to National Teaching Committee, May 7, 1936. National Bahá'í Archives.

88. Emogene Hoagg to National Teaching Committee, December 28, 1936. National Bahá'í Archives.

89. *Ibid.*

90. National Spiritual Assembly to Maude Tegart, January 15, 1937. National Bahá'í Archives.

91. "Topeka Bahá'í Community," pp. 5-6.

92. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

93. Interview with Keith Schulte, conducted by the author in October 1986.

94. See *The Bahá'í World*, vol 9, (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1945) pp. 28-29.

95. "Topeka Baha'i Community," pp. 4-10; *Topeka City Directory*, 1935-1940.

96. "Topeka Baha'i Community," p. 10.

97. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

98. *Bahá'í News* (January 1947) p. 16. Conference photo.

99. This section is condensed from Duane L. Herrmann, *Ninety Years in Kansas—The Bahá'í Faith: 1897-1987* (Topeka, Kan.: Buffalo Press, 1987).