

Enterprise: second oldest in U.S.?

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This brief overview of the early history of the Baha'i Faith in Enterprise, Kansas, was written by Duane L. Herrmann of Berryton, Kansas, a Baha'i for 17 years who has served on Assemblies in Topeka and Hays, Kansas, and the Kansas District Teaching Committee, has degrees in education and history, and is presently helping the U.S. Baha'i Publishing Trust in its efforts to produce a Baha'i encyclopedia.

It is fairly common knowledge that Chicago is the first and oldest Baha'i community in America. And many are aware of the uncertainty as to whether Kenosha, Wisconsin, or New York City has the honor of being next in line. But now there is a distinct possibility that a third city may have preceded them as the second oldest community in this country.

After Ibrahim Kheiralla had given his series of classes on the Faith in Chicago a number of times, he traveled to new cities, most notably Kenosha. But before that he made a side trip that is only now becoming more widely known. Where did he go and what were the results? Was this indeed the second Baha'i community?

There is some evidence that a student in one of Mr. Kheiralla's Chicago classes was a Miss Josephine Hilty who was in that city to continue her musical training. Eventually, she would perform in Europe and teach at a Kansas college, but that would come later. Her family had connections in Chicago; her uncle had had an exhibit at the Columbian Exposition of 1893, among other things.

Miss Hilty's hometown was Enterprise, Kansas. Her mother, Mrs. Jacob (Barbra) Ehram, was a Swiss emigrant who was searching for truth. Mrs. Ehram had helped found Enterprise; even before the streets were laid out, and the prairie settled by Europeans, she owned and operated with her brother the first store there. By the time her daughter went to Chicago, Mrs. Ehram was the wealthiest woman in Enterprise. But material goods and social status did not satisfy the yearning in her soul; she sought out one teacher after another, and when Josephine told her of the teachings of Mr. Kheiralla, she invited him to Enterprise to teach.

Mr. Kheiralla arrived in Enterprise in July 1897 as a guest of the Ehrams and held classes in the parlor of their home which attracted considerable notice. An article in the weekly Enterprise paper was headlined: "The Bible Is Not the Truth." 2 The day before, the weekly in Abilene, just down the road, headlined its article "Teaches Strange Things." 3 Both articles appeared at the top of the front page; the Abilene article was reprinted in both major dailies in Topeka (the state capital, 80 miles

away). One carried the same headline, while the other announced: "Hoffman's New Religion: The People Found Out What Ails Agricultural College Regent." 4 This was a reference to one of Mrs. Ehrsam's nephews who apparently attended a few of the first classes. His activities in Kansas politics guaranteed ample publicity for Mr. Kheiralla's visit and classes.

Accounts of class size ranged from 22 to 27 students, most of whom were relatives of Mrs. Ehrsam's or other members of "polite society" in the area. The evidence suggests that eight of them- including four family members- accepted the Faith at that time: with one more enrolled later in the year. So it appears that there were at least nine Baha'is in Enterprise, Kansas, in 1897.

Today a district, regional or national teaching committee would send someone to help them form an Assembly and begin community activities such as the Nineteen Day Feast. Each member would receive The American Baha'i which not only has news of Baha'i activities across the country but also carries catalogs and other information from the Baha'i Publishing Trust. Baha'is from nearby communities, many also having Assemblies, would undoubtedly visit the friends in Enterprise whose members would be invited to district conventions, summer and winter schools, and other area-wide events.

But that is today, not 1897, 1898 or 1899. Then, the closest Baha'is community was in Chicago, some 600 miles away, and much more remote than it is via a two-hour plane flight. There were no other Baha'is communities on the continent. In fact, there were only a handful of isolated Baha'is, one in Nebraska, another in South Dakota, with the nearest in Kansas City (where there were two, but one of them moved to Enterprise in 1903), and Josephine, who moved to St. Louis. These others were more alone and isolated than the Baha'is in Enterprise.

As for studying, there were only two booklets in all of America on the Faith, both written by Mr. Kheiralla and both containing his own personal ideas. There was no other source of information in 1897: no books, no magazines, no pamphlets, no cassettes, no movies, no radio station, no scriptures. Only the two little booklets. How could these early Baha'is possibly have any idea of what a Baha'is community should be?

The Baha'is in Enterprise did see one another; they were related by family ties or moved in the same social circle. But there was no Assembly, and there were no Feasts, deepenings, prayer meetings or any other gatherings of a Baha'is nature. Excerpts from some of Mrs. Ehrsam's letters to Mr. Kheiralla's secretary give evidence of their situation (spelling is from the original): "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 makes a bond of unity between us." 6 This was written in May 1899. And in another letter she writes, "It's been such a long time since I heard of you We are a little band of believers here but have no one to instruct us What has become of Mr. Chase? He used to write to one of the believers here but no one has heard lately." 7 She asks if the Getsingers could stop on their way to California: "Let me know how the believers are prospering and how they grow in grace and knowledge" 8

The only evidence she gives of further activities together are the lines: "We (Rose Hilty, her daughter-in-law) live close and see one another every day. We talk much about the blessed truth and long to hear and know more about (it?). 'Oh God give me Knowledge faith and love' is the desire of my hearth at all times." 9 She closes, "Hoping to hear from you soon I remain yours for the truth, Mrs. J B Ehr- sam" 10

Later, in 1912, one of the Baha'is in Enterprise, with her daughter who had accepted the Faith sometime after Mr. Kheiralla's visit, met 'Abdu'l-Baha in Chicago. Elizabeth Renwanz is listed in The Dawning Place as having attended the ground breaking ceremony for the House of Worship in

Wilmette, but no city is given for her. i 1

Shortly after the turn of the century, Rose Hilty and her family moved to Topeka, becoming the first Baha'is in that city. The Baha'i community of Topeka has been continuous since then. The family returned briefly to Enterprise in 1917-20, during which time a couple of contributions were received by Bahai Temple Unity from the Baha'is of Enterprise (some had been received up to 1912).¹² But no record has been found to indicate that the Baha'is of Enterprise ever gathered together for any Baha'i activities after Mr. Kheiralla left them. One long-time resident recalled the mother of Elizabeth Renwanz holding "religious meetings" in her home about 1912,¹³ but nothing further is known about them.

Owing to the lack of solid evidence we cannot claim that Enterprise was the second Baha'i community in America. But of one thing there is no doubt: it was the second location of organized Baha'i teaching on this continent. And that alone will assure a place in history for the Baha'is of Enterprise, Kansas, of 1897.

NOTES

1. Abilene Weekly Chronic/e, Abilene, Kansas; July 16, 1897, p. I.
2. Enterprise Journal, Enterprise, Kansas; July 17, 1897, p. I.
3. Abilene Weekly Chronic/e, Abilene, Kansas; July 16, 1897, p. I.
4. Topeka Daily Capital, Topeka, Kansas; July 14, 1897, p. 3.
5. "Supplication Book of Students in Miscellaneous Cities, from 1895 to (blank)," National BaM'i Archives, Wilmette, Illinois.
6. Letter dated May 3, 1899, from Barbra Ehram to Maud Lampson, in "Maud Lampson papers," National Baha'i Archives, Wilmette, Illinois.
7. Ibid.
8. Letter dated from internal evidence to be late in 1899 from Barbra Ehram to Maud Lampson, in "Lampson papers," National Baha'i Archives.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Bruce W. Whitmore, *The Dawning Place* (Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1984), p. 246.
12. Contributions ledger, Bahai Temple Unity, National Baha'i Archives.
13. Helen Erickson to Duane Herrmann, letter of October 23, 1980, in the author's possession.