

NINETY-FIVE YEARS IN TOPEKA:

The Topeka Bahá'í Community, 1906-2001

A brief account by Duane L. Herrmann

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In September 1906 a family moved to Topeka. This was not in itself unusual, many families move to the capital city each month. This family, though, made a difference in Topeka's history. The family came from Enterprise, Kansas, near Abilene. The unusual fact about this family was that both husband and wife had attended the classes on the Bahá'í Faith that had been held in Enterprise nine years before, and the wife was one of those who had accepted the Bahá'í Faith as being true. The arrival of the family marked the establishment of the Bahá'í Faith in Topeka and the beginnings of the Topeka Bahá'í Community, setting in motion a chain of events which grew strong with the passing of decades and continues today. This first believer in Topeka was Rose Hilty, wife of Leonard Hilty.

She had been born near Grasshopper Falls, KS in 1863. She and Leonard married in 1881 and settled in Enterprise near his family. They had three daughters, the middle one dying as an infant. Rose and Leonard attended the Bahá'í classes in the summer of 1897 along with several other members of his family. She accepted the Bahá'í Revelation as being true.

The self-proclaimed teacher of the Bahá'í class in Enterprise did not teach the class about participation in the Bahá'í community, he barely mentioned the Prophet-Founder of the faith, Bahá'u'lláh (which means "The Glory of God") or the Head of the faith at the time, 'Abdu'l-Bahá (Servant of the Glory). Much other information he fabricated. He later left the faith in anger when he learned his teachings were not in accord with actual Bahá'í teachings and that Bahá'í scripture would not be changed to suit him. As a result, the Bahá'ís in Enterprise did not know how to function as a Bahá'í community. These were the very early days of the Faith, there were few Bahá'í institutions or organized communities anywhere in the world.

In these latter years of the nineteenth century there was some contact between individual believers in different cities but it was quite informal on a personal friendship basis. Some communication was passed informally from one community to another. In 1905, Rose and another believer in Enterprise signed a petition which had circulated through the American Bahá'í community requesting the Head of the Faith to come visit this country. He did in 1912. Rose had also begun buying Bahá'í books as soon as they were published and subscribed to the first Bahá'í magazine when it was started in 1910. After her death these materials were donated to begin the Topeka Bahá'í Library.

In 1907 another member of the class also moved to Topeka from Enterprise, Maud Kirkpatrick. No records survive from these years to indicate what Rose and Maud may or may not have done as a community. Maud died in Topeka in 1911 and was buried in Enterprise beside her infant daughter, but a Bahá'í community was growing in Topeka.

In a interview before her death, Rose Hilty recalled that she "helped to organize a group of about 12 or 14 people in the year 1912." That year she also had a dream about 'Abdu'l-Bahá which impressed her deeply. He was in America that year and laid the foundation stone of the Bahá'í House of Worship in Wilmette, IL north of Chicago.

Some correspondence survives from 1911 which may have been a stimulus for the activity in Topeka the next year. The letters were written by Barbara Ehram, Rose's mother-in-law, in Enterprise (who had also attended the Bahá'í class in 1897 and become a believer) to Rose in Topeka. Barbara Ehram asked if Rose had seen the article on the Bahá'í Faith in a recent issue of **Everybody's** magazine. From the Barbara's next letter it is apparent that Rose had read it too. The article was a source of encouragement to both of them.

Additional correspondence survives from Barbara to Rose in 1912. Two other believers had traveled from Enterprise to Chicago to meet 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Their experience was shared with friends in Enterprise, and through these letters, with Rose. The personal contact with 'Abdu'l-Bahá'í was electrifying.

A list of Topeka Bahá'ís survives from 1919 due to several members signing a letter to 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Few other records survive from that time so this list is significant. Some information is known about most of the individuals on the list. These include Anna & Jennie Boyd (sisters, seamstresses, whose father came to Topeka early enough to be listed in the city directory of 1871. Anna died in 1923 after being hit and run over by a car, Jennie died the next year), Mrs. Nellie Amos (who remained a believer for decades), a "Mrs. Hardy" (one of the six listed in the city directories for those years), Harry R Whittelsey and his sister, Susan (President and Treasurer, respectively, of Whittelsey Mercantile which owned and operated a chain of seven "Owl" grocery stores in Topeka. They do not appear to have maintained a lengthy connection with the Bahá'í community), Margaret Williams (widow of Barker Williams, she was also the Librarian for the Metaphysical Library of Topeka, located with the Universal Truth Center in her home, and a Presbyterian. She maintained a tenuous connection with the Bahá'í community until she died in 1935), Etta Trump (sister of Margaret Williams, wife of Charles P. Trump, yard foreman for Thomas Lumber Co, moved to Los Angeles in the early 1920s after her husband died), and Louis and Nina Kreage (he was Secretary of the Independent Telephone Co and President of the Universal Truth Center of Topeka).

One other name on that list left a lasting place in the American Bahá'í community in its educational and literary life. That was Bertha Hyde Kirkpatrick. She came to Topeka in 1908 from Massachusetts to help her brother, Arthur Hyde, raise his son after the death of his wife. He was the first full-time history professor of Washburn College. Bertha was a science teacher at Central Park Elementary. In the mid teens her sister and mother, in Urbana IL, learned about the Bahá'í Faith and became believers. They shared the news with Bertha and she accepted the Bahá'í Revelation also.

This was the first sustained, personal contact the believers in Topeka had with the Bahá'í community outside Kansas. As a result, more efforts were made to observe the Bahá'í Feasts and holy days and initial attempts to organize the Topeka Bahá'í community administratively were begun. Early in 1920 the National Teaching committee urged all small Bahá'í communities to select a Treasurer, even if no other officers or organization is attempted. A community treasurer could channel contributions to the National Bahá'í fund for support of teachers who were traveling to help new Bahá'í communities and to finance building the House of Worship. Rose Hilty was selected

Treasurer for Topeka and sent at least one contribution from the Bahá'ís of Topeka.

Among the papers of Alfred Lunt, a member of the National Spiritual Assembly of this time, is an undated Bahá'í membership list for the country. It gives three names for "Topeka," two of which don't appear on any other list that has been found to date. The three names and addresses are: "Miss Bertha Hyde, 1534 Boswell; Mrs Matt Weightman Jr., 1263 Fillmore, Mrs C.E. Heer, 1515 Polk." The last was the oldest daughter of Rose Hilty who is on the list with an address of Enterprise, KS.

That this list is different from the one from 'Abdu'l-Bahá is not surprising. He was responding to correspondence He had received. The other list was based on criteria that was not specified. Membership definitions were very fluid in the early decades of the 20th century. Many members of the Bahá'í community then also held membership in other social or religious organizations which are now known to be contradictory.

For a few days in December 1920 a special visitor was a guest of the Topeka Bahá'í community. He was Jináb-i Fadil, the last teacher sent by 'Abdu'l-Bahá to America to educate the believers here. Rose Hilty came from Enterprise to help in preparations for his visit. She stayed with her daughter, then moved to Topeka permanently. Also, Albert Vail, the Unitarian minister who taught his congregation the Bahá'í Faith (thereby starting the Bahá'í community of Urbana IL) also came to help.

Jináb-i Fadil arrived from Lincoln, NE on the 18th and left for Kansas City on the 21st of December. The proclamation of the independent status of the Bahá'í Faith was a by-product of his visit. The first newspaper articles about him state that he is Christian. After an initial reception, attended by the minister of the church where his first lecture was to be given, he was clearly identified as Bahá'í. That lecture was quickly moved to the Orpheum theater. Other lectures were held without incident at such places as the Elks Club and Washburn College..

At his lecture at the Universal Truth Center a member of the audience remarked gratefully that, "I've always felt that too many missionaries are sent to the Orient, but I'm delighted to realize that now missionaries are coming from the Orient to give us knowledge and wisdom." The President of the Center, also a member of the Bahá'í community, proudly announced that the library had a "complete set" of Bahá'í books..

At the 1925 National Bahá'í Convention, Corinne True, who had traveled in the mid west the past year visiting various Baha'i communities, reported on her visit to Topeka. No report remains in Topeka of her visit nor have details of her remarks been found, but her visit indicates some activity. The level of activity among the Bahá'ís in Topeka had declined as the 1920s progress due to the departure of Bertha Hyde.

A crisis had developed at Washburn College in 1921 and Dr. John E. Kirkpatrick (the second history professor there) resigned in protest. Dr. Arthur Hyde (the head of the history department) resigned in his support and both left Topeka. Bertha left with them after school was out in 1922, and married Dr. Kirkpatrick two years later. They settled in Olivet, MI where he taught at Olivet College. In Michigan she helped found Louhelen Bahá'í School and became an editor of **World Order** Bahá'í magazine and member of the editorial board of *The Bahá'í World*, a series of reference books.

Dr. and Mrs Kirkpatrick were back in Topeka at the end of 1930 when he was hospitalized; his father was President of Security Benefit and they had insurance for the hospital here. During the time of their marriage they had agreed to disagree on religion. Dr. Kirkpatrick was a Congregational minister and, when he had asked a missionary friend in Palestine about the Bahá'í Faith, the erroneous information he received soured his opinion. In the hospital he and Bertha began reading together a small compilation of Bahá'í scripture that her sister was editing. This contact with the Bahá'í scripture changed his mind.

His last significant words before he died, he wrote on a piece of paper: "One thing only, to be a good Bahá'í."

He is buried in Mt. Hope cemetery in Topeka, a member of the Topeka Bahá'í community

Little is known of the activities of the Bahá'ís in Topeka from the time Bertha left until the early 1930's. In November 1933 a professional lecturer, who also gave lectures on the Bahá'í Faith, came through Topeka. Her name was Orcella Rexford and she lectured mainly on nutrition. After each week of paid lectures, a free lecture on religion was offered. During the first lecture on the Bahá'í Faith she openly announced the claim of Bahá'u'lláh to be the return of Christ. This generated considerable interest for the second and final Bahá'í lecture. Over two dozen people in Topeka decided to form a class to study the Bahá'í Faith in greater detail after she left.

A teacher came from Chicago to help organize the class. She was here for two weeks and gave 46 lectures on various subjects in that time. This class became the Topeka Bahá'í Fellowship.

Several believers from earlier decades were part of the Fellowship, Rose Hilty among them. She was interviewed for her memories of earlier years in Topeka and the very earliest days of the Bahá'í Faith in Kansas going back to 1897. The notes from her recollections formed the only history of the Kansas Bahá'í community until the 1970s when the 40th anniversary of the Topeka Bahá'í Assembly was celebrated. Historical research was begun for that occasion and has continued to this account.

The Fellowship met regularly for study and observed the Bahá'í Feasts and holy days. In April 1934 Fellowship members attempted to elect the first Spiritual Assembly of the Topeka Bahá'í community but, since procedures had changed since the 1920's, the process was not completed. Since Spiritual Assemblies can only be formed in April each year, the Topeka Bahá'ís had to wait a year to try again.

During that next year traveling Bahá'ís stopped in Topeka to bring personal contact with the larger Bahá'í community. The most notable of these was Ali Kuli Khan, the retired Charge 'd Affairs of the Persian legation to the United States. His ambassadorial status made him an unusual visitor to Topeka.

In April 1935 the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States sent a representative to assist the Topeka Bahá'ís to help them carry out the process of forming a local Spiritual Assembly. The election was successful and the Assembly was formed. The nine members of that first Assembly were: Mr. Paul Brown, Mrs. Irena Stevens, Mrs. Mae Minor, Mrs. Irma Coburn, Mr. Louis Kreage, Miss Ruth Stevens, Mrs. Amos, Miss Teagart and Mrs. Mae Stone. Paul and Ruth served on the Assembly nearly every year for the next half century until their deaths in the 1980's.

A Local Spiritual Assembly is the governing council of the local Bahá'í community and conducts many of the functions of the clergy of other religions. Councils are also elected on the regional, national and international levels. All of these councils have nine members and none of those members have any higher status than any other member of the Bahá'í community. These councils may be the largest grass roots democratic movement on the planet.

They are composed of ordinary people who are learning to make corporate decisions. The consultative process of council decision making is a distinct alternative to millennia of authoritative power figures. The existence and operation of these councils constitute a planet-wide social revolution. The decisions these councils make are improving the educational level of the members of their local community, and aim to remove barriers of ignorance and prejudice that have grown up over generations and centuries. From these councils come new ways of thinking based on the Bahá'í sacred scriptures with the aim of finding unity and agreement.

Despite the successful formation of the Spiritual Assembly in Topeka in 1935, the next years were difficult ones for the Bahá'í community here. The Assembly was re-elected in 1936, but divisive problems continued to such an extent that it could not be re-elected the next year. Some individuals did not want to learn the Bahá'í teachings, others wanted to run the affairs of the community according to their own ideas instead of following Bahá'í teachings. Gradually these people moved on to other interests and new members came into the community who truly wanted to be Bahá'ís. By 1938 these problems were resolved and the community was united and the Assembly was reformed.

Another test arrived two years later. The Guardian, and Head of the Bahá'í Faith succeeding 'Abdu'l-Bahaá, decided that community boundaries would best follow civil jurisdictions. Several members of the Topeka Bahá'í community lived outside the city limits of Topeka (in unincorporated areas of North Topeka, Seabrook and Wakarusa) and were therefore now in a separate Bahá'í community – the Shawnee County Bahá'í Community. Being in a separate Bahá'í community they could not be members of the Spiritual Assembly of Topeka. Their vacancies on the Assembly were filled and, in time, a separate Spiritual Assembly was formed in Shawnee County.

On 20 February 1941 an article appeared in the Topeka State Journal about the local Bahá'í community. It described the Bahá'í Faith and some basic beliefs and practices and listed the local believers, even giving their addresses. These were: "Miss Fern Latimer and Mrs. Loretta Latimer, 612 Fillmore; Will Stewart, 1157 Washburn; Mrs. W. S Amos, 1914 Huntoon; Mrs Irma Coburn, 511 w 8; Mrs H.C. Stevens, 601 Mulvane; Mrs. George Ashworth, 717 Parkview; Mrs Olive Kaley, 1267 Washburn; one negro member, Miss Edna Reynolds, 1901 High, and Mrs Campbell." Campbell had been quoted earlier in the article and her address was given there as 403 Huntoon.

Others members "reported as out-of-city believers," meaning in the Shawnee County Bahá'í community, were: "Mr and Mrs Paul Brown, Mrs Arthur Schulte, Mrs Nora Tew and Miss Ruby Sinell." Art Schulte was not listed, he would join the community later in the year.

Several of these believers became a long-term core of the Topeka Bahá'í community into the 1980s. Paul Brown (a building contractor) and wife, May (a cook during the 40s at the veterans hospital) had weathered the difficulties of the 1930s and remained steadfast for the next half century. Their loyalty and depth of understanding of the Bahá'í teachings was exemplary and served as a guide and inspiration for succeeding generations.

Art Schulte (a draftsman for Sante Fe Railroad at this time) and wife Cora also became pillars of the community in the 1940s until their deaths in the 80s. Olive Kaley, who entered the community before her husband Frank (a bus driver), was also steadfast until her death in the 1970s. Bertha Campbell (a writer for the health department at the time of the interview who later became Society Editor for the Topeka Daily Capital) was another pillar until her death in the 70s.

Ruth Ashworth and Fern Latimer Howard are unique in that their parents entered the Bahá'í community at the same time they did. Ruth's husband never formally entered the community, while Fern married a Baha'i. All were active in community affairs until their physical health necessitated moving to nursing homes.

By the end of 1941 several members had died or moved away leaving insufficient numbers to re-form the Assembly in April 1942. A special meeting of the community was held on 13 March 1943 to consult on ways to increase the number of believers would be living inside the city limits so the Assembly could be re-formed. At this meeting Art and Cora Schulte decided they would move from their home in North Topeka, outside the city limits, into the city. On 15 April they moved to 630 Lawrence and the Assembly was re-formed on 21 April. It has not lapsed since that date. Some time after the election the city annexed Seabrook and the Bahá'í family there also became members of the Topeka Bahá'í community.

During the spring of 1942 several members of the Topeka Bahá'í community attended the National Bahá'í Convention in Chicago. A small article appeared in the Topeka Daily Capital that May listing their names and telling a little about the convention. Those who attended were: Paul and May Brown, Olive Kaley and her daughter Marceline, from Hollywood, Mrs. Lloyd Tew, Cora Schulte, Loretta Latimer and her daughter Fern and Bertha Campbell. All remained firm believers for the rest of their lives.

In November 1942 a member of the National Spiritual Assembly was in Topeka for a few days. She spoke at two public meetings and hosted the Topeka Bahá'ís for the Feast of Knowledge. To make it a truly special event she held the Feast at – The Chocolate Shop, a social spot in the lower level of 911 Kansas. What a memorable Feast that must have been! One person writing about it later described the event as "stimulating." Undoubtedly!

A very large (over 12 column inches) Associated Press article appeared in the newspaper of 7 February 1943 telling of the completion of the exterior of the Bahá'í House of Worship in Wilmette, north of Chicago. The appearance of the article must have surprised and delighted the local believers. Later, there was also a AP photograph of the House of Worship in the newspaper. Construction of the building had begun in the 1920s and was financed solely by Bahá'ís on a cash only basis, no debts were incurred. During the depression construction ground to a halt – no one had any money. Work was resumed later but was halted again during World War II. The structure was finally completed and dedicated for worship in 1953.

Early in 1944 the local Bahá'ís learned that simply following the practices of their religion could end in surprising results. One evening during the period of fasting they read about themselves in the State Journal: "Topekans of the Bahá'í faith these days are reading The State Journal's page 1 weather table religiously – literally. From March 2 to 21, a period of fast and prayer, the Bahá'ís do not eat between the moment of sunrise and sunset, and if they aren't up and thru with breakfast before the official minute of sunrise it's probably a pretty long day. Gloomy morning that it was,

Saturday had no perceptible sunrise and what should happen but that line in the weather summary was pulled out in a last minute make scramble for an extra line of space in Friday night's edition. The composing room has been asked to yank out the Kaw river stage or temperature extremes for its extra lines of space between now and March 22."

By the early 1940's Bahá'ís in Topeka had become very involved in efforts to share the Bahá'í teachings with others in the city as well as helping establish other Bahá'í communities in other cities. One of the efforts in Topeka to acquaint the population with the Bahá'í belief in the equality of the races was a "Race and World Unity Conference" held in the Hotel Jayhawk on 18 April 1945. It was a very integrated audience in a time of extreme segregation.

Teaching outside the city was carried on through the Regional Teaching Committee appointed by the National Spiritual Assembly for this purpose. Different members of the Topeka community were appointed members of this committee, and its successors, for several decades. In 1946 Topeka was chosen to be the site of a regional teaching conference and Bahá'ís from several surrounding states attended. It was a milestone event for the Topeka Bahá'í community. Another was held here three years later, by then such events were taken in stride.

Some other things did raise a few eyebrows. May Brown told of one unusual time when a Bahá'í moved into Topeka. The Bahá'ís here had known of her coming and were looking forward to meeting her. May happened to be downtown shopping when she saw a lady she did not know wearing an outrageous hat, and thought, "Only a Bahá'í would wear a hat like that!" These were the days when every well-dressed woman wore a hat and they were often expressions of the wearer's individuality.

At the next Bahá'í meeting, May entered the room to find that lady already there – and wearing another outrageous hat! Despite the hats, they became good friends. May refused to tell the interviewer the name of that particular believer. Many times while telling stories such as this, May would stop to laugh and catch her breath, then say, "I can't tell that one!" And go off into gales of laughter. Something has certainly been missing since her passing.

Fern Latimer became the first Bahá'í from Topeka to attend Louhelen Bahá'í School in Davison MI. She attended a week-long session in August 1947. Her comment about the week reported that it was "very wonderful." In the 1960's Paul and May Brown lived at two other Bahá'í schools for several summers while Paul repaired many of their buildings. These were in Geyserville, CA and Eliot, ME. He had retired from his carpentry business and was glad to be of service to the larger Bahá'í community. He also remodeled a storefront in Wilmette for office use by the Bahá'í Publishing Trust.

In August 1948 Topeka Bahá'ís rented space for their first Bahá'í Center. This was room four on the second floor of 108 W 8th. Over succeeding decades several other places were rented, but there were times none were possible. Currently many Bahá'í activities are held at the Quaker Meeting House at 603 W 8th.

In December 1948 Topeka Bahá'ís were surprised to learn that a member of the cast of "Oklahoma," which was on tour and in performing in Topeka, was Bahá'í. She joined the local believers to celebrate the Feast of Dominion that month.

In 1949 a small notice in both Topeka newspapers reported on that year's state Bahá'í Convention in Topeka. It also listed other cities in Kansas where Bahá'ís were residing at the time: Topeka, Wichita, Kansas City, Kinsley and Burlingame.

Another milestone occurred in 1950 when the first Bahá'í marriage in Kansas was performed in Topeka. That wedding united Fern Howard, daughter of one of the members of the early Fellowship, and Dr. Scott Howard, a doctor of chiropractic from St Louis. They chose to live in Topeka and make a home for her elderly mother. They had no children.

Bahá'ís from Topeka were often elected delegates from Kansas to the annual National Bahá'í Conventions or attended on their own as spectators. Among those elected as delegates in the early years were: Fern Howard, May Brown, Paul Brown, Cora Schulte, Bertha Campbell, Edna Savilles, Ruth Ashworth and Ernest Grant

A special guest for the holy day observance of Naw-Ruz 1954 was Elsbeth Renwanz. Her mother had become a Bahá'í after attending the class in Enterprise in 1897. Together the two of them had gone to Chicago in 1912 to see 'Abdu'l-Bahá. She shared those memories with the Bahá'ís of Topeka making it a very special New Year celebration indeed.

At the Naw-Ruz celebration the next year, the Topeka Bahá'ís learned that their efforts were successful to assist a Bahá'í from outside of Kansas move to Wichita so that the first Spiritual Assembly there could be formed. Wichita would now have the second Bahá'í Assembly in Kansas. It was another joyous New Year.

Several Bahá'ís from Topeka attended the National Bahá'í convention in April 1955. They were: Dr Scott & Fern Howard, Paul, Brown, Cora Schulte, Margaret Loveless, Ruth Ashworth and her son George. The delegate from Kansas that year was Dr. David Ruhe from Leawood. He was eventually, in the 1960's, elected to be a member of the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States, the next year elected its Secretary, then, in 1968, elected to the Universal House of Justice where he served in Haifa, Israel until 1992.

On 24 August 1955 the Topeka Bahá'í Assembly sent telegrams to President Eisenhower asking for his support to alleviate the persecution of the Bahá'í of Iran and another to the Shah of Iran asking for his assistance in the same matter. Paul Brown sent the telegrams on behalf of the Assembly and delighted in telling how shocked the telegraph clerk was to send those telegrams – not an everyday occurrence in Topeka!

Unknown to the Bahá'ís in Topeka a young lady in Tehran was watching from her home as the dome of the National Bahá'í Center of Iran was being demolished. It was a beautiful dome, one of the landmarks of the city. A few years after this Mahin Omidvaran left Iran and, after a short time in Italy, came to the United States. She settled in Lawrence, Kansas and a few years later moved to Topeka with her husband and children. It is a small world.

In December 1955 Bahá'ís attended the State Bahá'í Convention in Topeka from: Topeka, Kansas City, Wichita, Emporia, Hope and Leawood, Kansas.

The 1950s were years of quiet growth with emphasis on nurturing fledgling Bahá'í communities around the state, most notably Wichita, Emporia, Salina and Kansas City. In contrast the 60's were years of change. The first changes were calm and recognizable, several Bahá'í families moved to

Topeka and became very active in the Topeka Bahá'í community. These included Don and Genay Newby who came in 1965.

Don was no stranger to the believers in Topeka, he had lived here and taught in the Topeka school system one year in 1950s, Genay was his new wife. He again taught art in the city school district and she worked for Blue Cross & Blue Shield, quickly becoming a supervisor. Both were active on the Topeka Bahá'í Assembly and its committees. They were also active with the State Goals Committee to help other Bahá'í communities in Kansas and Don was elected the Kansas delegate to the National Bahá'í Convention all the years he was here. He left to pioneer in Venezuela in 1971 and Genay moved to Emporia.

Another other new family was that of Dr. Gary and Nancy Larson. He secured a position as professor of English at Washburn University in 1966. They arrived from Atlanta, GA but both were originally from Kansas. They had entered the Bahá'í community while students at the College of Emporia in the 1950s. Both served on the Topeka Assembly and various committees until Nancy's death in 1972. Gary accepted a position at Wichita State two years later.

Change accelerated in the late 60s when hippies began to enter the Bahá'í community – even in Topeka! May Brown, in her 70's by then, recalled opening the door one day to see two very shaggy people she did not know who greeted her as Bahá'ís. She remembered thinking, "If Bahá'u'lláh loves them, so will I," and welcomed them into her home. In a few years the size of the Topeka Bahá'í Community exploded with young people.

In 1968 the Topeka Assembly spearheaded efforts to amend the Kansas statutes to recognize Bahá'í marriage. Up to that time a civil marriage was required in addition to the Bahá'í certificate. This goal was achieved and the second couple to be married under the new law were young Bahá'ís in Topeka.

As the first century of the Topeka Bahá'í community nears its end, more and more local believers have made pilgrimage to the Bahá'í World Center and holy places in the Haifa-Akka area of Israel. The first Bahá'ís to go from Topeka on pilgrimage were Paul and May Brown. They attended the International Bahá'í Conference in Palermo, Sicily in 1968 and went to Israel from there. The Universal House of Justice, that had planned the conference, invited participants to come to Israel for a special large-group pilgrimage after the conference. The next Topeka believer after that was Mark Dillman, in 1974. After Mark, Ruth Ashworth went accompanied by her son, George and, following them, Duane and Virginia Rittis. The Rittis' had lived in Saudi Arabia for twenty years and it was politically impossible for them to travel the few miles to Israel. After retirement they moved to Topeka and were able to make the pilgrimage. The youngest Bahá'í from Topeka to go was Trosten Herrmann when he accompanied his father and brother in 1999. He was almost twelve at the time.

The Topeka Bahá'í Community has been largely unobtrusive in the life of the larger community, quietly going about its way learning to conduct its affairs on a basis where no one is rejected or excluded for their race, religious background or gender. Over the decades members of the community have come from many religious, national and racial backgrounds: Native American, white, black, Persian, Chinese, etc.