

Born February 7th, 1887 at Fort Dodge, Iowa, Fred Mortensen was the third son of an impoverished immigrant family. His parents, James and Johanna, had arrived from Denmark just a few years prior with the hope that James would find better work as a violinist. Sadly, this never came to fruition, and James was unable to provide adequate support for his family of thirteen children.¹ Falling prey to the bottle, he gradually became a drunk, and, little by little, stopped coming home.²

By 1893, nearly six hundred banks and fifteen thousand businesses had failed due to one of the worst economic depressions in American history. It was during this period that the Mortensen family relocated to Minneapolis, Minnesota. Abandoned by their father, the Mortensen brothers quit school in order to provide for their family. Even at a very young age they managed to cope with what was available—stealing food or digging through garbage cans behind restaurants. In time Fred and his two older brothers found work with the *Minneapolis Star* newspaper. Initially hired as menial labor, Fred soon became a mailer. However, he resented this position, and by the age of ten left the *Minneapolis Star* for the streets.³

After a short time roaming the neighborhood, the Mortensen brothers soon found their way into a local gang. Lacking the valuable guidance of a father figure, Fred began to depend on his fellows for social acceptance. Yet while his peers were important, he felt naturally their better. He had an innate sense of superiority, a feeling that he could easily best those around him. Fred was unafraid to speak his mind, and possessed the physical stature to back his words. Years spent on the streets made him hard and ruthless; he

¹ Of these thirteen, four boys and three girls survived. The others succumbed to tuberculosis or consumption.

² From an interview with Fred's daughter, Kathryn Penoyer: Oct. 20th, 2003. Notes in author's possession.

³ Ibid.

became a confident, determined, and natural leader, claiming “. . . fighting was a real pleasure, as welcome as a meal . . .”⁴

Fred and his companions spent their days engaged in all manner of reckless activity. They would often roam the streets looking for trouble, and broke the law whenever the chance presented itself. He writes, “every day in every way I became tougher and tougher. And breaking a grocer’s window to steal his fruit or what-not was, as I thought, a great joke.”⁵

In addition to such general mayhem, Fred and his friends spent many days in the saloon, drinking heavily and brawling. He later recalled, “the great evil that did so much to make us hard, was the saloon with its attendant evils.” In fact, Fred says, he came to enjoy brawling—an undertaking to which he found himself well suited. He and his friends found great pleasure in terrorizing the local populous, especially the Russian immigrants and Jewish businessmen:⁶ “Making the Jews feel that they were back in Russia was lots of fun. I can’t begin to tell you how we enjoyed persecuting them, stealing their wine, breaking their windows, in fact doing everything but setting fire to their homes.”⁷

Despite his mother’s objections and efforts to teach him a better path, Fred continued increasingly toward a thug-like lifestyle. He later recalled: “My dear mother had done everything in her power to make me a good boy. I have the deepest love for her

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Anti-Semitism was strongly displayed in all avenues of American culture at this time. Additionally, Anti-Semitic plots were causing great controversy in military and government sectors. Record numbers of immigrants were entering the United States. at this time from Russia and the Balkans. Russians were often viewed as associated with anarchism, which came under heavy attack after the assassination of President McKinley in 1901 by Russian anarchist Leon Czolgosz.

⁷ Fred Mortenson. “When a Soul Meets the Master,” originally published March, 1924 in the Baha’i newsletter *Star of the West*, now out of print.

and my heart has often been sad when thinking of how she must have worried for my safety as well as my future well-being.”⁸ Though but seventeen, Fred had become an intolerant, aggressive, even violent youth.

In 1904, Fred, his brothers, and other gang members decided to rob a local train. During the heist, Fred’s younger brother stole a large bag of mail. While his brother was doing so, Fred spotted a number of police approaching them, scattering the gang. Concerned that his younger brother was too small to carry the bag and run from the police, Fred took the bag and ran. While this spared his brother, it made him the target: “. . . in my haste to get away from them I leaped over a thirty-five foot wall, breaking my leg, to escape the bullets whizzing around about.”⁹ He was then taken to jail, where a prison doctor improperly set his broken leg. As a result, Fred was left with a permanent limp, the broken leg a bit shorter than the other.¹⁰

The following months were spent in jail, recovering from his injury. It was during his incarceration that Fred’s life was changed irrevocably. Appointed to defend him was Albert Hall, an established lawyer well known for his willingness to defend the poor. Hall was also, by this time, a well-known and respected Baha’i—later appointed to the Baha’i Temple Unity and President of the Executive Board. Besides handling Fred’s case, Hall spent many nights speaking to Fred about the Baha’i faith—an independent world religion devoted to building unity among all people. Fred would later recall:

Albert Hall told me, hour after hour, about the great love of Abdu’l-Baha for all His children and that He was here to help us show that love for our fellowmen. Honestly, I often wondered then what Mr. Hall meant when he

⁸“When a Soul Meets the Master.”

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Penoyer interview.

talked so much about love—God’s love, Baha’u’llah’s love, Abdu’l-Baha’s love, love for the Covenant, love for us, from us to God, to His Prophets, etc. I was bewildered.¹¹

Because Fred could not read at this time, Hall gave him a dictionary to use in order to read a Baha’i book also provided by Hall. With the aid of these new books, Fred taught himself how to read. For reasons even he did not completely understand at the time, Fred’s experience in jail had a profound impact. However, as soon as he was able to walk, Fred decided it was time to leave. While in jail, he lured a guard close enough to his cell to take him by the neck, strangle him to unconsciousness, and take the keys.¹²

Fred spent the next four years as a fugitive. He fled first to California, where he worked for the Oakland paper. After experiencing the great earthquake of 1906—undoubtedly shaken by the ordeal—Fred decided the Midwest was a far safer region. He then toured the Dakotas, moving from town to town, occasionally finding employment with local papers.¹³ It was during this time that Fred rediscovered the book given to him by Albert Hall. Yet unlike four years prior—and somewhat mysteriously to Fred—his mind became fixated upon the words of Abdu’l-Baha. Though faced with possible arrest, in 1910 he returned to Minneapolis to visit Hall—a district attorney—to learn more about the Baha’i faith: “I returned to become more bewildered, so I thought; and I wondered why.”¹⁴

Fred was in regular communication with Albert Hall who, despite his status as an attorney, did not turn him in to the police. This, combined with Fred’s surprise at a

¹¹ “When a Soul Meets the Master.”

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ “When a Soul Meets the Master.”

complete lack of attention given by the authorities, gave the impression that he need no longer fear prosecution for his jailbreak. No longer a fugitive, Fred moved to Minneapolis. In 1912, Fred heard of Abdu'l-Baha's visit to Green Acre,¹⁵ and rumor that he might return to Palestine, failing to come West: "I heard rumor that he might go back home and not come west, and immediately determined to go see him. I wasn't going to miss meeting Abdu'l-Baha after waiting so long to see him."¹⁶

Such a marked new interest in religion, especially an eastern religion, by a rogue and thief such as Fred raises a number of questions. What is the Baha'i faith? Where are its roots and what was its place in early twentieth-century American society? Was it a passing fad of the time, sparked by popular interest in Orientalism and transcendentalism? Fred was not a spiritual man, yet his exposure to the Baha'i faith changed him completely—why? In light of this dramatic change, a brief history of that religion is necessary in order to appreciate its influence on him.

The Baha'i teachings were set forth in the mid-nineteenth century by Baha'u'llah, meaning "the Glory of God." Born Mirza Husayn-'Ali, an Iranian nobleman, Baha'u'llah abandoned a life of affluence and prestige in favor of service to humanity. Known for his charity and wisdom, he was called "Father of the Poor" and spent his days providing comfort to the needy.

In 1844, word reached Baha'u'llah of a new religion—the Babi faith. Siyyid 'Ali Muhammad, or the Bab ("the Gate") announced that he was the new divine Messenger promised by Muhammad. The Bab prepared his followers for another Manifestation of God who was to come after him and unite all humanity. When Baha'u'llah learned of the

¹⁵ Baha'i center, Maine.

¹⁶ "When a Soul Meets the Master."

Bab's message, he became a Babi and began to champion the new faith. The Babis faced intense persecution by Muslim authorities and thousands gave their lives as a result of their beliefs. This included the Bab, who was executed by firing squad in 1850.¹⁷

Though his family lineage saved him from outright execution, Baha'u'llah suffered four months of imprisonment in an infamous underground dungeon known as the Siyah-Chal, or "Black Pit." Bound together under the weight of heavy chains, in awful conditions, fellow Babis were daily sent to the executioner. It was under these conditions that Baha'u'llah witnessed a breathtaking vision: a "Maid of Heaven" appeared, announcing Baha'u'llah's station as God's newest Manifestation. Like the dove that appeared to Jesus Christ and the angel Gabriel's visitation to Muhammad, this vision marked the beginning of Baha'u'llah's revelation.¹⁸

Baha'u'llah's message was one of universal peace and brotherhood, and, even more revolutionary for the time, that all religions were a part of the progressive One Religion of God, systematically revealed by each Messiah. Baha'u'llah declared that this new revelation from God provided the spiritual foundations for the imminent globalization of humanity. Baha'u'llah's revelation included eleven tenets to which all Baha'is must adhere:¹⁹

1. The Oneness of God: The Universe and all creation therein have been created by God and are moving toward God. He is Unknowable, Omnipotent, Omniscient, All-

¹⁷ William Hatcher, *The Baha'i Faith, The Emerging Global Religion* (Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1998), pp. 6-34.

¹⁸ Hatcher, pp. 6-34.

¹⁹ Hatcher, pp. 74-96.

Perfect, Supremely Good, and Supremely Loving.

2. The Oneness of Humanity: Humanity is the apogee of Creation, the highest form of life: "Ye are the Fruits of One Tree, and the Leaves of One Branch. Deal ye one with another with the utmost love and harmony, with friendliness and fellowship. . . . So powerful is the Light of Unity that it can illumine the whole Earth."²⁰

3. The Oneness of Religion: Baha'u'llah declared that humanity is undergoing a collective maturation process similar to that of individual humans. At each stage of development, God sends a new Messenger to teach humanity. This has been the same Holy Spirit manifested in each new Age, a concept known as "progressive revelation." Since the essence of each revelation is the same, all religions belong to the same Religion of God: "Many Lanterns, One Light. Love the Light, not the Lantern."²¹

4. Independent Investigation of Truth: Baha'is believe that one of the main sources of conflict today is the fact that many people blindly and uncritically follow various traditions, movements, and opinions, leading to fanaticism. The critical search for truth enables an individual to know why he or she adheres to any given ideology or doctrine: "Being One, Truth cannot be divided, and the differences that appear to exist among the many nations only result from their attachment to prejudice. If only men would seek out truth, they would find themselves united."²²

5. The Spiritual Foundations of Society: If individuals remain greedy, immature, selfish, and unspiritual, even the most perfect economic scheme will not work. A

²⁰ Shoghi Effendi, trans., *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah* (Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1931), p. 228.

²¹ Abdu'l-Baha; spoken during a speech in Dublin, New Hampshire on Aug. 6, 1912. Speech can be found in the *Star of the West*, vol. II (Oxford: George Ronald Press, 1978), p. 4.

²² Abdu'l-Baha, *Paris Talks: Paris Talk: Addresses Given by Abdu'l-Baha in Paris in 1911*, 12th ed. (London: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1995), 40.9.

satisfactory solution to the world's present economic calamity lies in a profound change in hearts and minds, which only religion can produce. As humanity's fundamental nature is spiritual, there can be no lasting solution to any human problem that does not take this into account.

6. Equality of Men and Women: Women have all the intellectual abilities of men, which will be more clearly evident as humanity matures. Women have not yet fully realized their potential for historically they have been denied educational and social opportunities. As greater feminine influence shapes humanity across nations, there will be an elimination of war, resulting in permanent peace.

7. The Compatibility between Science and Faith: As Truth is but One Truth, it is impossible to find something scientifically false and religiously true. Religion and Science are “the wings upon which the intelligence of humanity can soar into the heights, with which the human soul can progress. Should man try to fly upon the wing of religion alone he would quickly fall into the quagmire of superstition, while on the other hand, with the wing of science alone he would quickly fall into the despairing slough of materialism. Either alone makes no progress.”²³

8. Elimination of the Extremes of Wealth and Poverty: An imbalance in economic conditions is a gross injustice to humanity and an obstacle to the establishment of unity. This does not imply that all individuals should receive the same income. There are natural differences in human needs and capacities, and some categories of service to society, which merit greater recompense than others. However, limits on minimum welfare standards as well as maximum income levels must be established.

9. Establishment of a Universal Auxiliary Language: The multiplicity of

²³ Abdu'l-Baha, *Paris Talks*, 44.14.

languages in the current world is a major impediment toward world unity. It simply prevents the free flow of information and prevents an individual from obtaining a universal perspective on world events. The tendency of a group or nation to be attached to its language can result in ethnocentricity. This invariably leads to conflict.

10. Establishment of a Universal Education: As education is absolutely necessary in establishing one's search for truth, and preventing the evils that result from ignorance, the world community must provide education to all. A universal education also prevents “half-education,” wherein fundamentalists teach doctrines of hatred and prejudice.

11. Abandoning Prejudice and Superstition: Prejudice and superstition are beliefs that result from strong emotional attachment and the lack of investigation of truth, keeping oneself engulfed in unawareness. Any prejudice—be it racial, economic, social, or linguistic—will prevent humanity from attaining unity, which is essential to world peace.

Baha’u’llah named his son Abdu’l-Baha, the “Most Pure Branch,” the sole interpreter of his writings. He was seen as living in perfect accordance with the revelation of Baha’u’llah, and served as the ideal standard toward which all Baha’is should aspire.

Despite rampant persecutions, Baha'u'llah's influence spread quickly. The movement Baha'u'llah began in 1853 soon found its way to America. In 1893, Reverend George A. Ford, a Syrian missionary, made the first public mention of the Baha'i faith in the West at the World's Parliament of Religions in New York. In 1894, Syrian professor Dr. Ibrahim Khayru’llah arrived in Chicago, Illinois. Educated in ancient religions, Dr. Khayru’llah became aware of the Baha'i faith while living in Syria. He possessed a number of Baha'u'llah's writings, however incomplete, which he took with him to

Chicago. There, Dr. Khayru'llah began to speak of Baha'u'llah in the hope of finding new believers. He soon found a welcome audience.²⁴

America was then ripe with a passion for the new and the mystical. The Victorian paradigm—though reaching its twilight—was still active: great interest in Japonisme, science and philanthropy,²⁵ wealthy elitism, and a foul view of the “underclass” seen as lesser creatures. This was the age of the industrial empires of Carnegie, Vanderbilt, and Rockefeller; the industrial revolution—with its attendant child labor, deadly work conditions, monopolies, and union battles—was in full swing.

Yet others, whose stories are rarely told, pressed for progress, equality, and a return to religious purism—a so-called “renaissance” sweeping America. This renaissance encompassed a number of intellectual, social, and religious movements initiated by a generation of educated youth who had become disenchanted with the institutions of their day. American scholars were preoccupied with issues concerning the relation among religion, society, and science; and many wanted to move toward a social advancement based on sound moral, scientific, and economic truths. There also existed a desire among many Christian organizations to return to an "old Christianity," one of love, social service, brotherhood, care of the poor, and the search for truth.²⁶

These intellectual and religious movements were a part of a generation influenced

²⁴ Hatcher, pp. 44-46.

²⁵ *Japonisme*: a late-Victorian interest in the Orient, which often included Japan, Egypt, North Africa, Persia, and China. The Victorian mind-set often used science to support a bigoted view of the “underclass” as filthy, childlike, and excessively sexual, and lacking respect for property. For much of this time period, there was rampant poverty in America, at times reaching 40 percent. The research of Darwin, thirty years prior, had created a large Victorian interest in philanthropy; often used to support racism, justify segregation, and racial purity.

²⁶ From the authoritative works of Thorstein Veblen, in his 1899 essay "The Theory of the Leisure Class;" and William James, in his 1897 essay, "The Will to Believe;" both in *The American Intellectual Tradition*, 2nd ed., vol. II, ed. David A. Hollinger and Charles Capper (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

by transcendentalism, which created within them an active spirit, revolutionary attitude, and desire to prove themselves. They tended to overlook evil and focus on the good, to refute the established doctrines of their time, and to seek new areas of truth for new and fresh beginnings in a search for their role in life and nature. This search gave rise to, among other features, a surge in "new age" interests such as eastern mysticism and various occult topics.²⁷

In her 1892 essay, "The Subjective Necessity of Social Settlements," Jane Addams, founder of the Hull House in Chicago, shared her view of the nature of these movements. Influenced by the Settlement movement underway in England, a great number of young, educated people were seeking the means to change what they saw as great social maladjustments of their day, such as the over-accumulation of resources by the rich, the destitution of the poor, and the lack of progress toward racial equality. They were a new generation, she said, one that longed for a means to establish universal brotherhood and unity: "toward that which makes us all alike, rather than that which makes us different." What they sought was a tangible, and lasting, expression of democracy—one based on universal morality and sympathy.²⁸

However, many had become frustrated. Though sincere in emotion, they felt they lacked direction and a means to such ends: "These longings are the physical complement of the Intimations of Immortality, on which no ode has yet been written. To portray these would be the work of a poet, and it is hazardous for any but a poet to attempt it."²⁹ Those

²⁷ George Santayana, "The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy;" in *The American Intellectual Tradition*, 2nd ed., vol. II, ed. David A. Hollinger and Charles Capper (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

²⁸ Jane Addams, "The Subjective Necessity of Social Settlements;" in *The American Intellectual Tradition*, 2nd ed., vol. II, ed. David A. Hollinger and Charles Capper (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

²⁹ Addams, p. 160.

of stronger character, she stated, became involved in the Christian humanitarian movement. "This is a turning," she says, "this renaissance of the early Christian humanitarianism, going on in America, in Chicago, if you please."³⁰

Living in Chicago at this time was an insurance salesman, Thorton Chase, later considered to be the first Western Baha'i. A few years before, Chase became a follower of the eighteenth-century mystic Emanuel Swedenborg. Swedenborg had spoken of a "new era" of Christianity similar to the Christian humanitarian movement underway in America. During his research into ancient religions, Chase was told by a friend of a "God who walked upon the Earth."³¹ Chase wanted to meet the person who made such a bold statement, and was introduced to a Syrian professor who had recently arrived in Chicago—Dr. Khayru'llah. During the course of their studies together, he learned of what Dr. Khayru'llah called the "Baha'i movement of the Orient," or the Baha'i faith. Chase became enthralled with the writings of Baha'u'llah, which he shared with enthusiastic friends. Together, Mr. Chase said, he and four others formally accepted the message of Baha'u'llah, marking the first foothold of the Baha'i faith in America.³²

Dr. Khayru'llah also introduced the Baha'i faith to another native of Chicago, Lua Moore, known later as Lua Getsinger, in 1897. Getsinger later became one of the most important figures of the early American Baha'i community due to her great missionary zeal and pure heart. Abdu'l-Baha gave her the name "Banner of the Cause" as a response to her work, and Shoghi Effendi, Abdu'l-Baha's grandson, later named her "The Mother Teacher of the West." She can be directly credited with planting the seeds of many Baha'i communities across the nation. In early 1898, Getsinger arrived in San Francisco. She

³⁰ Addams, p. 162.

³¹ O. Z. Whitehead, *Some Early Baha'is of the West* (Oxford: George Ronald Press, 1995), p. 4.

³² *Ibid.*

soon attracted the attention of wealthy socialite Phoebe Hearst, wife of George Hearst and mother to William Randolph Hearst. Hearst was well educated, and by this time already well known for her humanitarian efforts and pure Christian heart. She met with Getsinger on several occasions, during which Hearst's butler Robert Turner was also present. Turner would later become the first African American Baha'i.³³

Hearst was deeply moved by Baha'u'llah's message, the essence of which almost certainly appealed to her both as a humanitarian and a woman. She was known for her active personality, as well as her love for travel. Not surprisingly, in 1898, Hearst organized the first pilgrimage of Western Baha'is to Palestine. Together with Robert Turner, Dr. Khayru'llah, Lua Getsinger, as well as several members of Hearst's family (who later became the first Baha'is in Europe), she undertook a pilgrimage to the prison city of 'Acca to see Abdu'l-Baha, who had been imprisoned there for nearly forty years.³⁴

This proved to be a significant event, for it was then that Abdu'l-Baha became fully aware of the growing Baha'i community in America. The pilgrimage established communication between Abdu'l-Baha and the new converts in America, which enabled him to guide and bless their progress into the Baha'i faith.³⁵

Partially as a result of a rift caused by Dr. Khayru'llah,³⁶ in 1900 Abdu'l-Baha sent the first authorized Baha'i teachers to America in order to properly educate new converts there. These teachers included Mirza Asadu'llah, Mirza Hasan-i-Khurasani, and Mirza Abu'l-Fadl. Dr. Abu'l-Fadl had held one of the most honored positions in Persia

³³ Whitehead, pp. 13-21.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Dr. Khayru'llah, after a pilgrimage to meet Baha'u'llah in 1898, was told by Abdu'l-Baha that he needed to further research and contemplate the writings of Baha'u'llah, which Dr. Khayru'llah refused to do. Instead he attempted to establish himself in the West as the sole interpreter of the Baha'u'llah's writings, which caused a great deal of turmoil for the early Baha'is of America. His attempt, however, failed entirely.

until his conversion: that of the President of the Royal College of Teheran. Forced to give up his position after his declaration of his belief in Baha'u'llah, he had recently been released after spending three years in one of Persia's worse dungeons. Mirza Asadu'llah and Mirza Hasan-i-Khurasani were well loved by Abdu'l-Baha, and he felt they were most capable adherents and teachers of the Baha'i faith.³⁷

Chase stressed the education that these teachers had provided. Some, who had previously confused the Baha'i faith with the occult, lost their trust in the new faith. Others, through the instruction of these teachers, confirmed their belief. Yet as a net result, these men were instrumental in presenting an accurate message of the Baha'i faith to America.³⁸

By 1909, through the efforts of such people as Thorton Chase and Lua Getsinger, Baha'i communities emerged in and around the cities of Chicago, San Francisco, and New York. Chicago remained a leading center of Baha'i activity in the United States; and representative of the great zealotry typical of the era, in 1903 eleven Chicago Baha'is petitioned Abdu'l-Baha for permission to build a Baha'i temple in the West. This was accepted, and in 1906, eight hundred Baha'is from across the nation signed another petition supporting temple construction in Chicago. Corrine True delivered this petition to Abdu'l-Baha in 1907, and Abdu'l-Baha subsequently entrusted True with his instructions. Later that year, the Chicago Baha'i Assembly became the first Baha'i community to gain legal status, and in early 1908 the first plot of land for the future temple was purchased. From this point onward, the construction of a temple became the central concern of Baha'is nationwide, thereby marking a first step toward developing a

³⁷ Whitehead, p. 4.

³⁸ Ibid.

unified American Baha'i community.³⁹

Many of those Baha'is who traveled to California and New York first learned of the Baha'i faith in Chicago, and took with them the great zeal of the community members there. Chicago certainly became the focal point of the Midwest, which resulted in the establishment of Baha'i communities across Michigan, Wisconsin, Iowa, Ohio, and Minnesota.⁴⁰

California also became the home of a number of Baha'is during this period. The community was centered in San Francisco, largely the result of enthused and determined Baha'is such as Phoebe Hearst and Robert Turner. There were also many so-called "old-timers" in this area that had traveled there from Chicago, not least of whom was Thorton Chase. His position with the Mutual Life Insurance Society allowed him to travel extensively, and much to the chagrin of his employers, he spent more time speaking on the Baha'i faith than he did selling insurance. Most assuredly, he planted the seeds of the Baha'i faith in every city that provided an audience.⁴¹

New York City represented the eastern center of the Baha'i community in America, and held an active Baha'i population. Involved in the rising Baha'i movement was Paul and Mary Ida Haney. Paul and Mary were certainly a part of their generation. Both were educated and raised in spiritual households, yet both never fully accepted any one faith wholeheartedly. This was particularly difficult for Paul, who was the son of Reverend Richard Haney, a famous Methodist minister and one of the founders of Northwestern University in Evanston. Together, the Haneys spent seven years exploring different faith and philosophical based systems, exploring sects and even Christian

³⁹ See <http://www.bahaitemple.org>.

⁴⁰ Whitehead, p. 111.

⁴¹ Whitehead, pp. 1-13.

Science. This ended in 1900, for while staying at a hotel in Chicago, they were introduced to the Baha'i faith by friends of Thorton Chase. Finally, they had found what they believed they had been searching for. Shortly after declaring their acceptance of Baha'u'llah they moved to New York, where they became active members of the community.⁴²

In 1907, the first Baha'i Convention of America was held in Chicago. The convention consisted of thirty-nine delegates from thirty-six cities across the nation. The intention of the convention was clear: to create a means of establishing an active Western Baha'i community. This centered upon three key goals: unity, a practical means of reaching all Baha'is, and galvanization. A major aspect of this was the creation of the Baha'i Temple Unity, an executive board entrusted with the establishment and construction of the future Baha'i temple, which was of primary concern for most Baha'is at the time.⁴³

In the convention's pursuit of a practical means of reaching all Baha'is nationwide, the *Baha'i News*, a monthly newspaper, was established in 1909 and based in Chicago. This newspaper was sent to both individual members and to local Spiritual Assemblies (local Baha'i communities). Not only did this provide a sense of community among American Baha'is, but it provided vital access for all Baha'is to the guidance of Abdu'l-Baha. The Baha'is of the Middle East and the United States engaged in regular communication through the *Baha'i News*, which allowed questions to be posed to Abdu'l-Baha and his subsequent reply to be shared with all. Much guidance and resolution

⁴² Whitehead, pp. 1-13.

⁴³ See <http://www.bahaitemple.org>.

resulted from this communication.⁴⁴

In order to galvanize the American Baha'i community, it was decided that there should exist a means of providing Baha'i scripture to all. What resulted was the Baha'i Publishing Society, established in 1911. Also based in Chicago, the society produced Baha'i writings and books, many available for the first time. This was vital in that it provided everyone with a comprehensive source of Baha'i scripture.⁴⁵

In just over fifteen years, the Baha'i faith spread from Chicago to Boston, Honolulu to New York, Los Angeles to Akron, and Denver to Kenosha. The rapid expansion of the Baha'i faith is testament both to the message of Baha'u'llah and to the social circumstances that provided fertile ground for its acceptance. Reflecting on the tenets established by Baha'u'llah and the social movements of the time, it is clearer why early Baha'is might have found the Baha'i faith appealing. Evidently, many early Baha'is were well educated, financially advantaged, or popular socialites. And it is this very distinction that made Fred Mortenson unique among them.

Referred to as "the most important institution of its kind in the world" by the Guardian of the Baha'i faith, Green Acre, Maine, occupies a unique place in Baha'i history. Built originally as the Eliot Hotel in 1890, it received its name from poet John Greenleaf Whittier, a personal friend of the Farmer family. Sarah Jane Farmer, a partner in the hotel, was the daughter of prominent transcendentalist and inventor Moses Gerrish Farmer and philanthropist Hannah Shapleigh Farmer.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Based upon the correspondence between Abdu'l-Baha and Western Baha'is contained in the *Star of the West*, vol. 1, March 1910-Feb.1910. (Oxford: George Ronald Press, 1978).

⁴⁵ *Star of the West*, vol. II. First mention of Publishing Society in Oct. 16th release of the *Star of the West*.

⁴⁶ Excerpt from <http://www.greenacre.org/history.htm>.

While listening to a lecture in Boston, Sarah realized how much more receptive the heart and mind would be if the body were in a healthy and beautiful environment. She attended the Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, and returned with a conviction to establish Green Acre as a universal platform for the comparative study of religions. A quotation from Baha'u'llah appeared in the Green Acre program in 1899. And from 1900 to 1909, Green Acre provided a center for the development of the early Baha'i community.⁴⁷

Determined to meet Abdu'l-Baha, Fred Mortensen set out from Minneapolis, Minnesota, to go to Green Acre, Maine. Gathering what little finances he had, he boarded the train for Cleveland, Ohio. He lacked the funds to travel the entire distance to Maine; in addition Fred was attracted by a printers' convention being held in Cleveland.⁴⁸ He initially planned on staying a few days, but soon grew restless.

Despite his enthusiasm, Fred was anxious about meeting Abdu'l-Baha. After all, who was he, a poor man with dubious history, to meet one such as Abdu'l-Baha? Yet the night before he left Cleveland, Fred had a dream:

I was Abdu'l-Baha's guest; that I sat there at a long table, and many others were there, too, and of how He walked up and down telling stories, emphasizing with His hands. This, later, was fulfilled and He looked just as I saw Him in Cleveland.⁴⁹

Because his funds were low, Fred had to "hobo" his way to Green Acre. Trains ran, at this time, on coal power; coated with soot and grime, they were filthy outside the

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Fred held a lifelong interest in newspapers and publication.

⁴⁹ "When a Soul Meets the Master." The 'fulfillment' occurred later during the week Fred spent with Abdu'l-Baha in Malden, Massachusetts.

travelers' compartments. This was not only most unpleasant, but also dangerous and exhausting. "Riding the rods," as it was known, Fred hopped a coal train on the Nickel Plate Railway from Cleveland to Buffalo, New York. He arrived around midnight, where he then jumped a train headed for Boston, arriving around nine the next morning. Boston was his last link to Abdu'l-Baha:

... [as] I crawled off from the top of one of its passenger trains at Portsmouth, New Hampshire, I was exceedingly happy. A boat ride, a street-car ride, and there I was, at the Gate of Paradise. My heart beating double-time, I stepped onto the soil of that to-be-famous center tired, dirty, and wondering, but happy.⁵⁰

Indeed, the reader can imagine Fred's terrible state: unwashed, covered in coal soot, and smelling like a railcar. Given the background of most early Baha'is, it is easy to understand why Fred, looking quite literally like a shabby bum, was given such a cool reception. In fact, he had a hard time finding anyone who would speak to him.⁵¹

Fred had been given a letter of introduction by Albert Hall to Alfred Lunt, a friend of Hall's. But Fred, given such a chill reception, was unable to find someone to give him directions. Undeterred, he decided to knock on the door of the hotel. It is not difficult to imagine the shock the two women who answered felt when they saw Fred. Fortunately for him Mrs. Kinney, another well-known early Baha'i, and her friend Barbara Fitting were a bit more receptive than those he had previously met. Despite the protests of the men in the house, they allowed him to wash up and offered him a bed for the night.

⁵⁰ "When a Soul Meets the Master."

⁵¹ Whitehead, p.114.

Though they told Fred he would be unable to meet Abdu'l-Baha the next day, as his schedule was full, he might be able to see him before he left for Malden, Massachusetts.⁵²

The next morning, Fred was directed to the building where Abdu'l-Baha was greeting visitors. Though he was told Abdu'l-Baha would not be able to meet him, Fred still wrote his name on the appointment ledger, off to the side, at the very bottom. Just after, he spotted Abdu'l-Baha:

Being one of the last arrivals, I was looking around, to make myself comfortable, when someone exclaimed, 'Here He comes, now.' . . . After greeting several others and when about to go to His room, He suddenly turned to me and said in a gruff voice (at least I thought so) 'sit down,'⁵³

As Fred sat waiting, the first guest to be called was a doctor who had written a book on love. After what seemed to him but a moment, Fred was summoned to meet with Abdu'l-Baha. He recalled, "Why, I nearly wilted. I wasn't ready. I hadn't expected to be called until the very last thing. I had to go, and it was a strange feeling in my heart and wondering—wondering what would happen next."⁵⁴

After inquiring into Fred's health, Abdu'l-Baha asked him about his trip to Green Acre, a question Fred sought to avoid, "I dropped my gaze to the floor—and again He put this question. I lifted my eyes to His eyes and His were as two . . . sparkling jewels, which seemed to look into my very depths. I knew He knew and I must tell. . ."⁵⁵ After Fred spoke of his train ride from Minneapolis to Green Acre, Abdu'l-Baha's demeanor suddenly changed, as if "a wondrous light seemed to pour out. It was the light of love and

⁵² Whitehead, p.115.

⁵³ "When a Soul Meets the Master."

⁵⁴ "When a Soul Meets the Master."

⁵⁵ Ibid.

I felt relieved and very much happier. He gave me much fruit, and kissed the dirty hat I wore, which had become soiled on my trip to see Him.”⁵⁶

Fred often spoke of the great amount of fruit Abdu'l-Baha gave him during their conversation. As soon as he finished one piece, he was given another. He would later say he had never eaten so much fruit in one day. Interestingly, the day before Fred's arrival at Green Acre, Abdu'l-Baha asked one of his interpreters to buy a basket of fruit, as he was expecting a special guest to arrive the next day.⁵⁷

Their meeting concluded; Fred most likely returned to the hotel for the night, undoubtedly moved by his experience. The following day, as Abdu'l-Baha prepared to leave for Malden, Massachusetts, those Baha'is still at Green Acre gathered to say their farewells. Fred was among them, waiting to wave to Abdu'l-Baha as his entourage passed by. He could never have expected what happened next. As Abdu'l-Baha's car passed by him, it suddenly stopped, and much to Fred's surprise Abdu'l-Baha invited him to spend the week with him in Malden.⁵⁸

Unfortunately, what transpired between them during this time is unknown. What is known, however, is that Abdu'l-Baha and Fred became close friends for the remainder of their lives. Abdu'l-Baha often referred to Fred as “my son.”⁵⁹ Such an appellation was very rare for Abdu'l-Baha to make. They met again briefly a few weeks later, when Abdu'l-Baha, on his way to Chicago, requested a detour to Minneapolis. This was

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Penoyer interview.

⁵⁸ “When a Soul Meets the Master.”

⁵⁹ Penoyer interview.

unusual in that there was only a small Baha'i community there at the time. Fred, Albert Hall, and Abdu'l-Baha spent the day together—the last time they would meet in person.⁶⁰

The events leading up to and culminating in the meeting between Fred and Abdu'l-Baha are remarkable, even inspirational. Yet Fred's story was far from over, for he became a very different person after his time together with Abdu'l-Baha. Fred later recollected his experience:

These events are engraved upon the tablet of my heart and I love every moment of them. The words of Baha'u'llah are my food, my drink, and my life. I have no other aim than to be of service to His Pathway and to be obedient to His Covenant.⁶¹

Sadly, jealousy arose among certain members of Baha'i community as a consequence of the bond shared by Fred and Abdu'l-Baha. This first began in Green Acre. Referred to as a “filthy, horrid man,”⁶² Fred—though last to arrive—was given audience to see Abdu'l-Baha ahead of eminent members of the community. To compound the matter, Abdu'l-Baha kissed Fred's sullied hat—a rare show of affection to anyone, let alone a bum. Abdu'l-Baha further aggravated the issue by stopping his car, in front of the assembled community, and inviting Fred to spend a week with him as a personal guest. Those who strove to fall into good graces with Abdu'l-Baha were mortified by his actions. Their jealousy only intensified when Abdu'l-Baha referred to Fred as a son; later, these sentiments resulted in Fred's near-expulsion from the early Baha'i community.⁶³

⁶⁰ “When a Soul Meets the Master.”

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Penoyer interview.

⁶³ Ibid.

A year after their time together, Fred received a letter from Abdu'l-Baha that included yet another prophecy: "That trip of thine from Minneapolis to Green Acre will never be forgotten. Its mention will be recorded eternally in books and works of history." Thirty-two years later, Abdu'l-Baha's grandson, the Guardian of the Baha'i faith, included Fred's story in *God Passes By*.⁶⁴

Fred's life underwent a drastic change in direction after meeting Abdu'l-Baha. He firmly believed that the power of Baha'u'llah's message had created within him a new spirit, one devoted to the service of the Baha'i faith. He gave up his bad habits for he now lived and breathed the Baha'i faith. For the remainder of his years, he became a solid citizen, and dedicated his life to teaching the word of Baha'u'llah and to the Baha'i community.⁶⁵

Given sufficient funds to travel home by Abdu'l-Baha, Fred returned to Minneapolis for a short duration, working for the local paper. Yet he soon grew restless, and felt a call to action.

Focused on the Baha'i faith, Fred utilized his natural gifts of leadership, conviction, and action in teaching the message of Baha'u'llah. He decided to go to Atlanta, Georgia, in 1913 in the hope that he could combat the racial injustices there by teaching the Baha'i faith. Once again working for the local paper, Fred used his position to publish many articles about the Baha'i faith. He was also very active in organizing Baha'i teaching events, and often brought in guest speakers, such as Lewis Gregory, an active and well-known African American Baha'i. Later, in his book *To Move the World*, Lewis stated that because Fred kept him so busy, he dubbed him "Frederick the Great."

⁶⁴ *The Baha'i World: A Biennial International Record*, vol. XI (Wilmette: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1981), p. 485.

⁶⁵ Penoyer interview.

Though Fred taught himself how to read and write, he felt he was not properly qualified to give public orations on the Baha'i faith.⁶⁶

Shortly after the outbreak of World War I, but before U.S. involvement, the American Baha'i community wanted to send money to Abdu'l-Baha. They were concerned that he would be left without funds to engage in the many humanitarian activities for which he was known.⁶⁷ The Baha'i Temple Unity organized the collection process, and sent word to Abdu'l-Baha for permission to send a dignitary with the funds. Abdu'l-Baha responded that he feared such a journey would be impossible because of the war, though he would allow it. However, he refused the member selected by the Temple Unity to deliver the funds, and demanded that if funds were to be sent, it must be Fred who made the delivery. The Temple Unity grudgingly agreed, though they thought this was the biggest mistake Abdu'l-Baha had ever made: that he, unlike they, simply did not understand what "these people" were like. Their jealousy toward Fred intensified, for this was the first and only known instance that Abdu'l-Baha made such a special request.⁶⁸

In 1916, Fred boarded a ship for England, where he would then journey to Palestine. However, much to his disappointment, Fred's ship never completed its journey; it was stopped by a German U-boat and searched for weapons. The ship's captain was told that if any ammunitions were found, the ship would be sunk. Finding none, they were ordered back home with the message that any ship found carrying munitions would be destroyed. A short time later, a U-boat torpedoed the *Lusitania*.

⁶⁶ Penoyer interview.

⁶⁷ While Abdu'l-Baha was visiting America, he purchased a large amount of grain seed, which he took home with him to Palestine. Fearing the outbreak of a great war, Abdu'l-Baha used the seed to plant large amounts of wheat, rice, and corn on his estate. During World War I, the large amount of grain reserves fed the population of Palestine, which spared thousands from certain starvation. In recognition of his services, Abdu'l-Baha was knighted by the British government.

⁶⁸ Penoyer interview.

Fred spent the following years teaching throughout the United States. He spent a number of years in Montana, where he experienced great success. Fred published a number of articles in various newspapers across the state, particularly in Helena and Butte. In one instance, he felt obliged to correct an article printed in the *Montana Record Herald*, which gave credit for the conception of the League of Nations to an unspecified king of France. Encouraged by friends in Helena, he wrote a letter to the paper in which he clearly stated that Baha'u'llah, founder of the Baha'i faith, had revealed the basic principles of the League at least fifty years before it was established; furthermore, these same principles were explained by his son Abdu'l-Baha in a book titled *The Secret of the Divine Civilization*, written in 1875.⁶⁹ A few years later, Fred wrote an essay titled "The Three Great Lights," in which he eloquently described the nature of progressive revelation. This essay was published in the March 1925 edition of the *Star of the West*.

In late 1922, in a late-night diner, Fred met his future wife Kathryn May Rubeck. Kathryn was a cashier at the time, and was struggling to provide for her newborn son, Charles, who was under threat of a forced adoption by Kathryn's mother. The two became fond of each other, and some time later Fred proposed.⁷⁰

Fred considered himself very fortunate, for he always assumed he would never have children. Of the seven surviving Mortensen children, only one had a child, other than Fred.⁷¹ During their time together, Abdu'l-Baha told Fred that he would have "four blessings." Fred later understood what this meant, for he and Kathryn promptly had four

⁶⁹ Whitehead, p. 117.

⁷⁰ Penoyer interview.

⁷¹ Fred is the only member of his family to have a surviving bloodline.

children: Ethel was born in 1923, Fred in 1924, Kathryn in 1925, and Ray, born in Chicago, in 1927.⁷²

In 1925, an earthquake destroyed their home in Helena, Montana. They decided to move to Chicago, both to be closer to Fred's mother, living there at the time, as well as to be closer to the Baha'i Temple. Fred, still very much involved in the Baha'i community, diverted his attention to the upbringing of his children. Though he worked nights at the *Chicago Tribune*, and often arrived home around 3 a.m., he was very involved with his family. Every night he went over his children's homework, and he made sure they were well fed and properly clothed.

In addition to their school studies, he was very involved in their sports activities and other interests; and, most important, he taught them the words of Baha'u'llah, stressing the importance of love in all facets of society. His children all became dedicated Baha'is. His daughter, Kathryn, remembers him as "a standard of fatherhood," whom she viewed as a saint. Fred's wife Kathryn, though not the educator of the household, was also a loving parent. Though it was several years before she became a Baha'i, she later became very active in race relations in Chicago.⁷³

Besides raising his family and teaching the Baha'i faith, Fred also enjoyed many physical recreational activities. He enjoyed boxing, a remnant of his youth, and became an exceptional exhibitionist boxer despite his limp; he even made some money from this activity. He was also very active in the local YMCA, was an excellent swimmer and skater, and enjoyed baseball and handball. In addition to sporting activities, Fred was also very involved in forming unions. Recollecting his experience with child labor, he

⁷² Penoyer interview.

⁷³ Ibid.

adamantly fought for age limitations, minimum wage, and safer working conditions. His work toward this end often put him in direct physical danger from anti-unionists.⁷⁴

By the end of 1946, at the end of World War II, Fred determined that, his children now grown, it was time for him to continue his missionary work. He desired to travel to Germany. Fred believed that the Germans needed the word of Baha'u'llah, and that when they took to an ideal it was whole-heartedly.⁷⁵ He wrote to Shoghi Effendi⁷⁶ for permission, but was told his work would be better suited for Austria than Germany.

However, shortly before his departure, Fred became seriously ill. A few months later, on June 13th, at 6:10 p.m., Fred passed away as a result of a cerebral hemorrhage. Despite his illness, Fred spent his last moments teaching the faith of Baha'u'llah. His daughter, Kathryn, writes: “. . . on the very eve before his death he spent his last time teaching the Faith of Baha'u'llah. His devotion cannot be measured in mere words. Abdu'l-Baha truly named him well when he said, ‘My Son.’”⁷⁷

Upon hearing of Fred's death, Shoghi Effendi sent a cable to his family: “Grieve passing beloved Fred. Welcome assured in Abha Kingdom by Master. Praying progress his soul. His name is forever inscribed Baha'i history.” Fred was buried in Cedar Park Cemetery in Chicago. As he requested, his autobiographical account “When a Soul Meets the Master,” was read at the memorial services.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Rapid expansion of the Baha'i faith in Germany testifies that, indeed, Fred was correct in his assumption.

⁷⁶ Grandson of Abdu'l-Baha, named by him as the Guardian of the Baha'i faith, the sole interpreter of Baha'i scripture.

⁷⁷ *The Baha'i World*, p. 486.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

Fred Mortensen's background was that of a rogue and thief. Fred was not an advantaged person, and as such would not be a likely candidate to understand, let alone embrace, a new religion. He lived his beliefs without benefit of wealth or education, much like his mentor, Abdu'l-Baha. He was so moved by his exposure to Baha'i teachings that the direction of his life changed instantly. The facts suggest a metamorphosis on a level other than scholarly.

Fred's story is well known in Baha'i history. The documentation is the result of his example of faith in action, not of his material accomplishments. Fred perceived a truth more impressive than that of his grinding poverty, more real than his material needs, and more important than his immediate gratification. He is an example of one who learned that material things are transient, while inspiration and faith survive. Such is the power of faith to change a life.

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