

# A Necessary History: Teaching On and Off the Reservations

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## *Abstract*

This article draws on the history of Bahá'í teaching activities on and off Indian reservations and reviews the early Bahá'í literature directed toward American Indian Baha'is with the goal of understanding and learning from that history. The teaching work conducted by the Central States Regional American Indian Teaching is examined to show examples of what worked, what didn't, and why. Conclusions are drawn as to what behaviors and actions are needed now to reinvigorate the indigenous teaching field.

## *Resumé*

Dans le présent article, l'auteur part de l'histoire des activités d'enseignement bahá'í dans les réserves et hors des réserves indiennes, et il passe en revue les premières publications bahá'íes orientées vers les bahá'ís amérindiens dans le but de comprendre cette histoire et d'en tirer un apprentissage. L'auteur examine le travail d'enseignement mené par le Comité d'enseignement régional amérindien servant dans les États du Centre pour donner des exemples de ce qui a fonctionné, de ce qui n'a pas fonctionné et pourquoi. Il conclut en formulant des observations sur les comportements et les actions qui sont maintenant nécessaires pour revitaliser le domaine de l'enseignement autochtone.

## *Resumen*

Este artículo recurre a la historia de actividades bahá'ís de enseñanza en y fuera de las reservas indígenas y revisa la literatura bahá'í temprana dirigida hacia los indígenas americanos bahá'ís con la meta de entender y aprender de esa historia. El trabajo de enseñanza llevado a cabo por El Comité Regional de los Estados Centrales para la Enseñanza a los Indígenas Americanos es examinado para demostrar ejemplos de qué ha funcionado, lo que no ha funcionado y por qué. Se llegan a conclusiones acerca de cuáles comportamientos y acciones se necesitan ahora para reinvigorar el campo de la enseñanza indígena.

Perhaps the best way to know where we are going is to reflect on where we have been. While some people may find history—facts and figures, names and dates, icons and symbols—relatively unimportant and possibly dull and boring, history is the story of how we got to where we are. More importantly, history shapes our individual lives even as it shapes our cultures and our collective future.

As we are aware, history has been recorded in some form since the earliest dawning of civilization, whether on stones, cave walls, wood, leather, bones, or leaves—its authors using whatever crudely crafted instruments were available. The oldest method for recording history is the oral tradition, whereby genealogies and family or tribal histories were passed down through the generations. Narrated as stories, such history chronicles the passing of seasons, provides cultural

context, and relates experiential wisdom that may help us prepare for what may lay ahead. Whatever form it takes, history is the invaluable repository of the past—our collective memory—and, when studied, one of our greatest teachers. Certainly, it is a guidepost to the future. By analogy, it is similar to the ancient *inuksuit*, the Arctic Inuit's stones arranged in tall human forms that rise above the frozen tundra, standing solidly with outstretched arms on two widely-spaced legs. For a weary Inuit traveler, the sight of an *inuksuk* meant security and provided a point of reference for travel routes to camps, fishing sites, hunting grounds, and sacred places. Sighting an *inuksuk* often meant the hope of survival for the weary wanderer, who obtained sustenance from caches of food buried beneath the snow at the feet of these tall, silent giants—bounty bequeathed by the benevolence of previous travelers as a gift for those who would follow. Similarly, our knowledge of history can provide us with the benefits left for us by the wisdom of tribal medicine men and bards. By the same token, it is the intent of this narrative to provide a useful retrospective on the relationship between the Bahá'í community and the Indigenous peoples in North America—and possibly even a guidepost for the continuation of this noble spiritual effort at community building among peoples of diverse cultures and spiritual orientations.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Following common usage, the terms “Indians” and “Natives” is used

I offer this brief historical account of the Bahá'í teaching work among the American Indians in four Central States as a case study of what lessons were learned by the non-Indigenous Bahá'ís when sharing the Bahá'í concept of a new revelation with the Native people. Before beginning this account, it is fitting that we revisit a remarkable promise by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá that is extremely relevant to any Bahá'í presuming to share his or her beliefs with those of such spiritual capacity and insight as the Indigenous peoples of North America.

In His “Tablet to the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada” (1916), ‘Abdu’l-Bahá said, “You must attach great importance to the indigenous population of America. . . . these Indians, should they be educated and guided, there can be no doubt that they will become so illumined as to enlighten the whole world” (qtd. in Shoghi Effendi, *Citadel* 16). Many years later, Rúhíyyih *Khánúm*<sup>2</sup> recalled her visits to several American Indian tribes, during which times she expressed

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interchangeably in this article to designate American Indians/Native Americans.

<sup>2</sup> Amatu’l-Bahá Rúhíyyih *Khánúm* was the title bestowed on Mary Sutherland Maxwell by her husband Shoghi Effendi (head of the Bahá'í community from 1921 to 1957), who also appointed her Hand of the Cause. The Hands of the Cause of God were a select group of Bahá'ís appointed to this role for life and whose main function was to propagate and protect the Bahá'í Faith.

deep understanding of the impacts and harms of European settlement on Native Americans, including how it interfered with culture, transmission of knowledge and history, and social well-being. She promised them that “the day will come when the Redman will study and know the history of his people” (“Message to the Indian” 6) as an affirmation of the importance of learning and knowing Indigenous histories. The White man has studied the Indians’ way of life for many years, she said, collecting the Indians’ cultural artifacts as “ornaments” (6) and putting them in houses “where thousands of people pay to enter and look at them” (7). She then informed her Indigenous audiences that three calls had come to them—one each from the Báb, Bahá’u’lláh, and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá—and reminded them that, during His 1912 visit to America, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá said to Indigenous peoples of North America, “Your mission is unspeakably glorious” (9).

Rúhíyyih *Khánúm* did acknowledge the dire problems presently subverting the potential of these noble peoples—namely, poverty, injustice, and lack of education. She tried to encourage them by affirming that if they “could only see with the eye of the spirit,” they would see that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s promise to them “is like a rope” put in the hand of a drowning person in deep water. She went on to say that if the Indigenous peoples will only “hold onto ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s promise,” it will pull them, their children, and their grandchildren “out of the water to safety” (“Message to the Indian” 9).

Non-Native Bahá’ís took to heart ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s injunction about service to Indigenous populations, and to that end, they moved onto or traveled to American Indian reservations and Canadian reserves. Shoghi Effendi reinforced ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s assurances with a reminder in an early Bahá’í newsletter. Addressing the non-Indigenous Bahá’í community, he emphasizes the importance of sharing the teachings of the Faith with the Indians, suggesting that their latent potential could become realized as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had promised:

He [Shoghi Effendi] has always been very anxious to have the Indians taught and enlisted under the banner of the Faith, in view of the Master’s [‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s] remarkable statements about the possibilities of their future and that they represent the aboriginal American population. He attaches the greatest importance to teaching the original inhabitants of the Americas the Faith. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá Himself has stated how great are their potentialities, and it is their right, and the duty of the non-Indian Bahá’ís, to see that they receive the Message of God for this Day (qtd. in *Lights of Guidance* 528).

Subsequently, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of the United States appointed a committee to facilitate and expedite the efforts to share the Bahá’í teachings about building

a world community beginning at the level of the community. The American Indian Service Committee (AISC) was formed in 1953 to support what Bahá'ís call “pioneers”<sup>3</sup> by supplying them with printed materials, helping with the planning and execution of activities, and providing traveling speakers.

The *Talking Leaves* newsletters (1953–1960), written by the AISC's secretary, Nancy Phillips, are filled with fascinating glimpses of life on the reservation and vignettes from the experiences of those early pioneers.<sup>4</sup> The goal of the pioneers was to inform tribal peoples about the Bahá'í vision of unity in diversity and the need to bring about the abolition of prejudice in order to recognize the oneness of all peoples. The early pioneers were a far-flung group of stalwart souls across reservations in the United States—only thirty Bahá'í teachers among the entire American Indian population by late 1958 (6). As Bahá'ís are forbidden to proselytize, the process of “pioneering” presents the substantial challenge of living among the people and trying

to become accepted, not as missionaries, but simply as another human being trying to share a gift.

Clearly, this was quite a different approach from those of the well-established Catholic and Protestant institutions, whose trained theologians and staff had been on reservations since the late 1800s. Christian missionaries were directed to their posts and provided with training prior to entering the field. Religious institutions financially support their churches on the reservations and their missionaries are given a parish, a mission, or a parsonage to live in, as well as a salary or stipend. This contrasts with the Bahá'í pioneers, who provide for their own needs and fend for themselves, a situation that all too often has led to brief terms of service because paying jobs were and are scarce on the reservations.

The establishment of Bahá'í communities within the American Indian tribal communities was thus extremely challenging. It was especially difficult to develop them to such an extent that they could become autonomous and survive on their own if the pioneers had to leave the reservation or move to another community. Too often, the pioneers were forced to move to locations where jobs and affordable housing could be found.

The ultimate objective for the Bahá'ís who undertook this challenge was to become sufficiently knowledgeable about the Indian culture and customs so that they could become accepted and, eventually,

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3 There is no clergy and no paid missionary posts in the Bahá'í Faith. The propagation of the Faith is left to individuals who “pioneer” to a community in another land or community and who share the teachings mostly by manifesting spiritual attributes in their daily activities.

4 See Nancy Phillips, *Talking Leaves*. The phrase “talking leaves,” Phillips said, was taken from the Cherokee language for “pages of writing.”

integrated into the local community and assist the Indigenous people in establishing a Local Spiritual Assembly, the elected governing body of a Bahá'í community. For this to be achieved, local inhabitants had to take the Bahá'í teachings to heart, and they had to become sufficiently knowledgeable about Bahá'í administration so that they could participate in this community structure in addition to their own communal and spiritual practices. When this occurred, the community could manage its own internal affairs without the need for pioneers or external assistance.

Rúhíyyih Khánum wrote to the pioneers about two concerns that they should always keep in mind: one is that pioneering should be done “for the *sake of God*” alone—that to do it for any other reason is to invite disappointment (*Manual* 21). Second, she emphasized that pioneers should teach new Bahá'ís that their relationship is with Bahá'u'lláh as a Messenger from God and that their connection to Him is not through the pioneer. In short, the believers should never be made to feel dependent on the individual who has been teaching them about the Bahá'í Faith. It was in this context that Rúhíyyih Khánum likened the pioneer's function to that of a spiritual parent:

It is really all remarkably like a family: the child grows up, begins to assert its freedom and the loving parents see it getting hurt and making mistakes which, if only it

would listen, it would not happen! But the child will not always listen and the parents cannot live its life for it. The Bahá'í pioneer who is a spiritual parent must just resign himself to the same thing. (*Manual* 21)

[A]t least 80 per cent of everything that seems wrong in the beginning will sort itself out within say a year, if the pioneer will be *patient, loving, understanding*, and will *persevere*. (*Manual* 98)

Because teachers of the Faith are explicitly forbidden to proselytize and even though all Bahá'ís are exhorted to teach others about their beliefs, Bahá'u'lláh explains that the attitude of the teacher should be one of humbly offering a precious gift to a friend:

If ye be aware of a certain truth, if ye possess a jewel, of which others are deprived, share it with them in a language of utmost kindness and goodwill. If it be accepted, if it fulfills its purpose, your object is obtained. If anyone should refuse it, leave him unto himself, and beseech God to guide him. Beware lest ye deal unkindly with him. (*Gleanings* 132:5)

The pioneers on the reservations had the challenge of sharing these new teachings about the unity of humankind and the oneness of religion without exhibiting the least bit of condescension, for the American Indians

have historically been victimized by those who employed coercive tactics to convert them to beliefs contrary to their own sophisticated spiritual view of reality. Instead, if they were to succeed in being faithful to their calling, the Bahá'í teachers had to befriend them while at the same time demonstrating complete sincerity, and share their beliefs and concepts in such a way as would not demean or disparage the traditional customs and spiritual susceptibilities of Native Americans (*Bahá'í Faith* 178).

#### NATIVE BAHÁ'Í LITERATURE AND COMMITTEES

The most important piece of training material for the early pioneers to the Native American reservations was a teaching brochure published by the AISC under the auspices of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States between 1952 and 1953. This simple manual was amazingly insightful in its scope and depth of information, containing, as it did, the goals of the National Spiritual Assembly regarding the American Indian Bahá'ís, together with directives from 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi in support of those goals. The various sections were devoted to informing those who intended to pioneer on the reservations about a wide range of cultural, legal, and religious topics. It encouraged Bahá'í youth to live on or near reservations, and it classified Indian tribes into what it described as "six main stalks": the Algonquin,

Athapascan, Iroquois, Muskogean, Shoshone, and Sioux nations.

Perhaps the next most important publication assisting Bahá'ís who desired to serve as pioneers among American Indians was a booklet in the Cherokee language (1954), the English version of which was published in 1955 under the title *The New Day*. The Navajo version, *Lahgo 'Áhoot' Éego Hanááhoolzhllzh*, contained an English translation, as did the version for the Oneida, published in 1956.

The AISC's monthly publication of *Talking Leaves* was probably the most important and consistent means of communication and guidance nationwide for Bahá'ís living among the various Indians tribes, whether on reservations or in nearby urban areas. The journal's issues provided information about arriving and departing pioneers, their activities, the response of the Indian peoples, and notices about gatherings and job openings.

After *Talking Leaves* ceased publication in 1960, there began a more formal publication in 1963 directed not to the Bahá'í pioneers, but to Native Bahá'ís themselves. Titled simply *Bahá'í Letter*, this publication was a straightforward and dignified communication whose language was simple, since English was a second language for many of the recipients, and it served as an effective instrument for instructing these new Bahá'ís about the teachings, laws, and institutions of the Bahá'í Faith.

Publication of the newsletter *Flaming Arrow* began in 1974. It, too, was

geared toward informing the American Indian Bahá'ís about such matters as the Nineteen Day Feasts, Bahá'í holy days, Bahá'í marriage laws, and the structure and functioning of the Local Assemblies. In addition to these instructional topics, the newsletter also included information about the various communities and was more inclusive in tone and subject matter. In 1980, the monthly *AITC News* replaced the *Flaming Arrow*. After its creation in Arizona in 1977, the Native American Bahá'í Institute (NABI) took control of all newsletters.

All of the early newsletters, along with other letters, individually produced booklets, pamphlets, and instructional materials, provided an irreplaceable resource for the American Indians who came into the Bahá'í Faith. Other Native-focused events organized throughout the years—Council Fires, Spirit Runs, special gatherings, and committees—are also a part of this history. Eventually, the AISC became the American Indian Teaching Committee (AITC), whose membership included several Native American Bahá'ís. The AITC later developed the Regional American Indian Teaching Committees (RAITCs). In addition, the National American Indian Teaching Committee (NAITC) was formed, although the NAITC and all RAITCs were permanently dissolved by the end of 2000 in order to decentralize teaching efforts and concentrate them instead at the local community level.<sup>5</sup>

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5 In a letter dated 30 May 1997, the Universal House of Justice explains: “The expansion of the Bahá'í community and the

#### A RESISTANCE STORY: “WHY SHOULD WE TEACH THE INDIANS?”

At this point, it is important to note that while teaching without proselytizing is difficult in and of itself, teaching someone from a distinctly different culture requires even more tact, humility, and acquired wisdom. This observation is especially applicable when a Bahá'í is sharing the teachings of the Faith with someone from a culture like that of the Indigenous peoples of North America, who tend to have a highly developed philosophical and spiritual worldview derived from their own religious history, traditions, and practices. Bahá'u'lláh purposefully constructed the Bahá'í Faith to be culturally neutral so as to be accessible to all the peoples of the world. Its teachers must become extremely attentive to the manner in which the Faith is shared so that no hint of cultural superiority or bias taints their efforts and so that no specific cultural perspective somehow becomes intertwined with the teachings themselves.

So it was that in the early spring of 1996, the newly-created RAITC for Kansas, Iowa, Nebraska, and Missouri was formed, with one appointee from

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growing complexity of the issues which are facing National Spiritual Assemblies in certain countries have brought the Cause to a new stage in its development. They have caused us in recent years to examine various aspects of the balance between centralization and decentralization.”

Kansas, one from Iowa, two from Nebraska, and two from Missouri. As one of those picked for this path of service, I will now describe my personal experience on this committee to offer a concrete example of the challenges we encountered in the course of some Bahá'í efforts at community building between Natives and non-Natives.

Our RAITC was mandated by the National Teaching Committee to educate our respective Bahá'í communities on *why* it was important to teach American Indians. Consequently, we sought out and created opportunities to give presentations—in private homes with groups of Bahá'ís, at summer and winter schools, and at Bahá'í conferences—about the value of bringing American Indians into the Faith.

During the years in which we served in this capacity (1996–2000), our committee found three common sources of resistance from the Bahá'í communities in regard to teaching American Indians. The first source of resistance depended to a great extent on the community's geographical proximity to a reservation: communities closer to reservations were obviously more aware of the importance of teaching Native peoples. Though these Bahá'ís knew of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement regarding the importance of teaching Native peoples, many still questioned why they should they teach the Indians instead of focusing on reaching the African American community, a charge which is viewed in the Bahá'í teachings as equally important.

A second source of resistance had to do with the growing desire among Bahá'í communities to reach out to people of other faiths, inasmuch as Bahá'u'lláh admonishes His followers, “Consort with the followers of all religions in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship” (*Gleanings* 43:6). Because of this teaching, many Bahá'ís began concentrating their efforts on participating in various interfaith groups. However, unless specifically invited to certain events, American Indians are not represented in most interfaith activities. In my estimation, this failure resulted primarily from the assumption of Bahá'í individuals or communities that they did not have ready access to American Indians, or at least certainly not to the same degree that they had to African Americans or people of other religions or cultures within their communities.

Few of the communities at the time were aware of how many American Indians lived in large urban communities or that American Indian Centers were being established in larger cities. There were no organized plans initiated to interact with Indians in urban Bahá'í communities. One explanation for this failure is that most non-Native Bahá'ís simply did not have any experience in interacting with Native people, the exception being the few resident Native Bahá'ís who were willing to provide guidance and instruction to those whom they trusted. Indeed, understandably, trust is a fundamental issue between Native and non-Native individuals, whether the individuals



are Bahá'í or not. Because of the well-documented history of vitiated promises, trust—especially between Native Americans and Whites—must be earned through consistent interaction over a period of time.

A third common source of resistance we found was the perception that there simply were not any Indians in the vicinity to whom one could bring Bahá'u'lláh's message. As one of the two appointees for Missouri on the RAITC, I found this attitude and belief puzzling and surprising. Being of mixed Indian heritage myself, I had spent years attending Native events in various states. Many of the attendees were full bloods, but many were also mixed-blood individuals like myself who count themselves as Indian.<sup>6</sup> Over time I came to realize that if a person did not physically fit the stereotypical image of what most believe an Indian

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6 The typical way for a Native person to introduce oneself is to tell one's lineage, where he or she came from. Briefly, my mixed heritage of provable Cherokee blood comes from my maternal grandfather from Alabama, whose mother was full blood Cherokee, and from a mixed-blood paternal Cherokee grandmother from Tennessee whose parents migrated to Texas. My paternal grandfather was a "half-breed." Family records indicate he was Southern Cheyenne. He was born in Caddo, Oklahoma, but migrated to Texas, where he met my Cherokee grandmother. He was orphaned and adopted at age five, and his official records proving his Indian heritage are unrecoverable.

should look like, Whites often would not recognize that person as being Indian.

It is in light of this misperception that the phrase "the invisible Indian" came into use. It meant that although American Indians lived and worked among the non-Indian population, they were not "seen," nor were their distinct cultural perceptions and experiences understood or appreciated:

Indians are America's invisible minority. Unless they left the reservation, they literally did not count until 1890 when the nation began counting all Indians—on the reservation or off—in its decennial census. Indians were not granted American citizenship until 1924. . . . They lack the visibility of other minorities. There are no [urban] Native American neighborhoods, no restaurants catering to Native American cuisine, no Native American grocery stores, and no video stores specializing in Native American movies—although there is no shortage of films about Indians. (Kunerth)

The movement and mixing of the human race has produced many people who no longer physically identify closely with their ancestors. Chinese, Mongolians, and Asian Islanders often can pass easily for American Indians; and mixtures of white, red, and black skin tones make it hard to determine what heritage a person may claim. It is

little wonder then that White Bahá'ís in the 1990s did not identify their acquaintances, coworkers, or neighbors as either full blood or mixed-blood American Indian. This is understandable, for as far as the Bahá'ís were concerned—especially in non-reservation states like Missouri—there were no Indians nearby. Consequently, our first job as appointees on the RAITC became one of educating the Bahá'í communities about the Native presence and culture by supporting and encouraging White Bahá'ís to attend powwows, learn what protocols to observe, forge genuine friendships, and find out how to volunteer and be of service.

#### ON FIRE AND CONSUMED WITH LOVE

“On fire and consumed with love” is the only phrase that describes adequately the incredible bonding experience that we RAITC members rapidly developed for each other—a bond and love that continued past the dissolution of the RAITC when the National Spiritual Assembly changed its focus to decentralization. Most of us had never met before, but upon meeting, we became enamored with one another and we all felt the “blazing love” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá describes that can exist among Bahá'ís:

The foundation of Bahá'u'lláh is love . . . you must have infinite love for each other, each preferring the other before himself. (*Promulgation* 218)

My hope is that through the zeal and ardour of the pure of heart, the darkness of hatred and difference will be entirely abolished, and the light of love and unity shall shine; this world shall become a new world; things material shall become the mirror of the divine; human hearts shall meet and embrace each other. (*‘Abdu’l-Bahá in London* 38)

Shoghi Effendi, too, speaks of this communal love:

If the friends will forget all personal differences and open their hearts to a great love for each other for the sake of Bahá'u'lláh, they will find that their powers are vastly increased; they will attract the heart of the public, and will witness a rapid growth of the Holy Faith. (*Dawn* 116)

Turn to your Bahá'í brothers and sisters, who are living with you in the kingdom. Indeed, the believers have not yet fully learned to draw on each other's love for strength and consolation in time of need. The Cause of God is endowed with tremendous powers, and the reason the believers do not gain more from it is because they have not learned to duly draw these mighty forces of love and strength and harmony generated by the Faith. (*Directives* 24)

Without the spirit of real love for

Bahá'u'lláh, for His Faith and its Institutions, *and the believers for each other*, the Cause can never really bring in large numbers of people. For it is not preaching and rules the world wants, but love and action. (*Directives* 40; emphasis added)

We appointees developed a unified, loving friendship of a caliber that cannot be adequately expressed in words, and it was this love and commitment to each other and to our task that was essential in leading us to success in teaching and service with our RAITC activities.

#### VIGNETTES ABOUT SERVICE

##### IOWA: THROUGH FRIENDSHIP

Iowa, although home to the Dakota Sioux, the Ioway, the Illini, the Otoes, and some of the Missouria, has only one federally recognized reservation, that of the Sac and Fox Tribe of the Mississippi, also known as the Mesquakie. The Iowa appointee, Marda Rast, was especially adept at serving the University of Iowa American Indian Student Association (AISA) in Iowa City, volunteering to be of service to the students and faculty who organized and held their yearly powwow.

For American Indians, powwows are highly anticipated social events that bring families together in a culturally empowered environment. The powwow provides a safe place for Indian youth to meet, to display their skills

as dancers, and often to find future spouses. Indian vendors sell their art, clothing (regalia), crafts, and traditional foods to each other and to the public. This is also the space for traditional Giveaways, in which certain families will honor others with gifts that took all year to plan and prepare—perhaps to remember a loved one who has “crossed over,” or to celebrate one who has been selected as a lead dancer.

Hosting powwows takes an enormous amount of time, energy, and volunteer commitments from one year to the next. To be valued by the University of Iowa AISA the way Marda was is no small feat. Her integrity as a White person on whom the Association could count to help with their powwows led to ongoing friendships with Indian families throughout Iowa, especially in the small, tightly knit community of the Mesquakie who did not take readily to outsiders.

##### NEBRASKA AND THE OMAHA

Nebraska holds federally recognized reservation lands for the Omaha Tribe, the Ponca, the Ioway of Kansas and Nebraska, the Santee Sioux Tribe of the Santee Reservation in Nebraska, the Sac and Fox Nation of Missouri in Kansas and Nebraska, and the Winnebago. Shahrokh Roohi and Phyllis Sheridan were the two appointees for Nebraska. Phyllis is a full blood Omaha Indian who lives on the Omaha Reservation in Macy. Shahrokh, a Persian believer, moved with his family to the small town of Lyons near

the reservation. Shahrokh—who was lovingly given the nickname of “the Shah” by the Omaha Indians, whom he served as a health educator and diabetes program director on the reservation—opened his home to RAITC meetings and to a steady stream of Bahá'í traveling visitors. Most of these visitors understood and accepted the “Indian protocols” that provided guidance on social interactions with Native people, especially on reservations.<sup>7</sup>

The Nebraska appointees opened Lyons to its first Bahá'í gathering, which brought over a hundred individuals together in this small town, including National Assembly member and Native American Jacqueline Left Hand Bull. In addition, because of the genuine love and respect shown to the Omaha Indians, in July 1996 the local Bahá'ís, supported by our RAITC members, were given the special honor of hosting the closing ceremonial dinner for the Omaha's resurrected Sun Dance. A good number of Indian Bahá'ís participated in the Sun Dance and White Bahá'ís traveled from several states away to willingly serve in various capacities for the four-day event.

Countless acts of community building took place over the four years of RAITC activity. Both Lyons and the reservation town of Macy observed this outpouring of love, interaction,

and collaboration between the Omaha Indians and the non-Native Bahá'ís.

### *Grandmother Lucy Dick*

One day, when Shahrokh was in Macy's Senior Center getting acquainted with the elders, he noticed a silver-haired person whom he had not met before. Sitting down beside her, he started a conversation and happened to mention that he was a Bahá'í. In turn, the Elder<sup>8</sup>—Grandmother Lucy Dick, whose brother had revived the Omaha Sun Dance—turned complacently to Shahrokh and said in a matter-of-fact voice, “I'm a Bahá'í, too.” Shahrokh, taken by surprise, said to Grandmother Lucy, “Where have you been?” She, in her wise and humorous way, replied, “I've been here all along. Where have *you* been?”

Where indeed! This is a common response among many Natives who became Bahá'í during earlier teaching efforts in the 1960s and 1970s and who still identify themselves as such even though they may not have had contact with other Bahá'ís in a number of years. After she became reacquainted with the Bahá'í community, Grandmother Lucy became an important, active, and dearly beloved friend to all. She supported the RAITC events, encouraged her relatives to attend them, and traveled to the events herself, even though she was in her seventies and used a wheelchair.

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7 “Protocols for American Indian Teaching.” Compiled by National American Indian Teaching Committee. March 1999.

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8 The capitalized “Elder” designates a position of wisdom, authority, and service to the Indian community in which he or she resides.

*Restoring a Legacy of Love*

The RAITC helped to organize the building of a small Bahá'í Center on a homestead plot of land in the heart of Macy that had been donated decades earlier to the Omaha Bahá'ís by Macy's first pioneer, Edna Atkins. Clean-up days were organized, trees trimmed, grasses mowed, and ditches cleaned out. The land was leveled and a small road repaired, and a new "Bahá'í Center" sign was painted by a mixed-blood Apache believer. Bahá'í Feasts, Holy Day events, devotional gatherings, and children's classes were organized by the local Omaha Bahá'ís and held in this one-room Bahá'í Center. Importantly, these events involved cooperation and support from the local pioneers to the reservation and from Bahá'ís who traveled to Macy from the RAITC's other three states. Persian, White, African American, and Indian believers from Illinois, Oklahoma, and Arizona also came to support the activities at Macy. Some of these Bahá'í friends have maintained their help and support to the Omaha Bahá'ís throughout the years.

In 1998, the Omaha Bahá'ís and the non-Native Bahá'ís organized a large event at the Center to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the Local Spiritual Assembly of Macy. The picture of that first all-Native Spiritual Assembly sat for years on Shoghi Effendi's desk and now hangs in the Mansion at Bahjí.<sup>9</sup> Several Omaha Indian Bahá'ís,

descendants of the members of that first, historic Assembly, lived on the reservation and continued annually to elect their Local Spiritual Assembly with the help of pioneers and other believers from Sioux City and Omaha.

## KANSAS: THROUGH SERVICE

Kansas is home to the federally recognized reservations of the Kickapoo, the Iowa, the Prairie Band of Potawatomi Nation, and the Sac and Fox. A Persian believer, Mahin Stanley, represented Kansas on the RAITC. Refusing to be limited by her hearing loss and with the full support of her ill, non-Bahá'í husband, she was volunteering at the vital Head Start Program on the Prairie Band Reservation at the time of her appointment. Mahin had earned the respect of the mothers and teachers in the program, and, as such, she was recognized and warmly welcomed onto the reservation. After her appointment, with the permission of her Indian friends, she took an additional member of the RAITC onto the reservation with her in order to establish another Bahá'í presence and friendship. This kind of endorsement from a trusted non-Native friend is highly regarded and may be the typical way that non-Natives are introduced into the inner Native circles—through an established friendship and the courtesy of asking permission.

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issue. The "Mansion at Bahjí" refers to the last residence of Bahá'u'lláh (1817–1892). The burial place of Bahá'u'lláh is on these same grounds beside the mansion.

9 The same picture is included in this

Mahin traveled with the rest of the RAITC members to Bahá'í events in other states, fully supporting the RAITC meetings and plans and using her quiet wisdom and guidance as a registered social worker to enhance our consultations. Mahin and her husband's sacrifices of home, health, and comfort were constant reminders to all who knew them that service to others is the bedrock of Bahá'í life. Their efforts were also a prime example of the way that Bahá'u'lláh intends all Bahá'ís to undertake teaching and assisting the communities in which they live.

#### MISSOURI: THROUGH VOLITION AND ACTION

Missouri has no federally recognized reservations, although it does have three federally recognized American Indian Centers. The Heart of America Indian Center in Kansas City serves approximately seven thousand families from all Indian nations and tribes in the Greater Kansas City area. In St. Louis, the American Indian Center of Mid-America serves approximately five thousand families, and the Southwest Missouri Indian Center located in Springfield serves twenty-seven counties. Missouri—named after the Missouri Tribe (People of the Big Canoe), a branch of the Sioux Nation—was the sacred hunting grounds of the Osage from Oklahoma. Other tribes also came to Missouri from the Plains, leaving abundant artifacts and archeological sites strewn across the state.

The oldest site of permanent dwellings in the United States dates back twelve thousand years and is located alongside the Missouri River near the state capital. Missouri's museums are full of the state's Indian history, all the way back to the Hopewell Indians circa the Woodlands era. Powwows abound on university and college campuses, in small towns and large cities, and are well attended, bringing in Native dancers and vendors from reservation states and territories. Indian-themed "trading posts," which are filled with dance and ceremonial instruments, Native artwork, locally raised buffalo meat, and the paraphernalia necessary to create beaded items, are common.

Perhaps for those Bahá'ís who had not fully appreciated the ample presence of Native peoples in their midst, all of this was indicative of an ancient history and was possibly not relevant to their present-day charge to make all peoples aware of the advent of Bahá'u'lláh and the Bahá'í teachings. Doubtless, this naive assumption exemplifies the social stereotype of the "invisible Indian."

In this context, we can appreciate that to teach the Bahá'í principles to peoples of diverse cultures, it is first necessary to become attuned to the perspective of those whom one proposes to teach, to first befriend them with sincerity and without ulterior motive. For certainly as we become ever more mindful of those "others" in our midst, we come to realize that everyone with whom we establish an authentic relationship has much to teach

us. As Bahá'u'lláh affirmed, we must be observant about those with whom we wish to share this vital information, and become “anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in, and center your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements” (*Gleanings* 106:1). Perhaps proactively providing American Indians with access to the elixir of the Bahá'í Writings is a powerful example of how we can be anxiously concerned for the age in which we live.

### *Necessary Knowledge*

As the two members of the RAITC for Missouri, Clay Schielfbein and I began our task of presenting to Bahá'í communities the importance of teaching American Indians by reiterating and studying with them 'Abdu'l-Bahá's promise to the Indians. To help accomplish this task, we used traditional Native tools such as the talking circle, an arrangement wherein all are allowed to voice their thoughts and concerns without fear of crosstalk, censorship, criticism, or judgment so that true sharing can happen in an atmosphere of trusted confidentiality.

We shared with the non-Native Bahá'ís that the rudest behavior in the American Indian world is to interrupt another's conversation—a behavior for which our Western culture is notorious. For Native people, interruption exemplifies arrogance and a lack of respect for what is being said.<sup>10</sup> We

explained how important it is to listen sincerely when a Native person talks, and we explained that Native people intuitively detect if one is not being sincere because they have had centuries of experience in learning when non-Indians are being duplicitous.

In addition to these general courtesies, which should adorn consultation in general, we also explained some more particular Native norms. For example, we noted that according to some tribal customs, direct eye contact should not be made, and that this tradition has nothing to do with lack of forthrightness or being open. In addition, some Native peoples consider it polite to speak in low tones of voice when in groups of people, and to wait patiently until all others have spoken.

Because of their adherence to these norms, Native Bahá'ís might often lose their chance to speak or share in Assembly meetings dominated by those anxious to get things done or those who are so acculturated to Western social practices that they speak rapidly, moving quickly from subject to subject, or—in spite of Bahá'í guidance to the contrary—interrupt one another. Above all else, we shared with our non-Native Bahá'í friends how crucial it is to keep one's word with Indian

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guidance in the Bahá'í Writings about how all consultation should take place. In short, this sort of frank, candid, and courteous discourse is the hallmark of how Bahá'ís are supposed to resolve problems and create plans within the family or the community.

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10 It should be noted here that all of these qualities are identical with the

friends and not to make idle or casual promises or commitments that cannot be honored.

Of course, these same behaviors resonate with and are parallel to how our Bahá'í Assembly meetings are supposed to be conducted. Consequently, Bahá'ís worldwide are familiar with most of these guidelines, whether one is Native or not. However, because such simple courtesies seem to have gotten lost in the melee of the wider culture, it is not uncommon for non-Native Bahá'ís to take on the frenetic tenor of Western culture in the course of consultation. While it may cause mild discomfiture among non-Native Bahá'ís, trying to adapt their rhetorical delivery so that it is respectful to Native Bahá'ís is essential to maintaining Bahá'í communities on reservations.<sup>11</sup>

### *Volition and Determination*

As our team of two in Missouri worked through the doubts and concerns of the predominantly White Bahá'í community, we gradually found acceptance, understanding, and renewed enthusiasm about reaching out to American Indians. Local teaching plans began to include an emphasis on trying to identify and reach Native

individuals of full or mixed blood whom they wished to approach with Bahá'u'lláh's central message that unity in diversity is required to create a global community. We stressed that genuine friendship is highly regarded among the Native people and that they would be inspired to teach others if Bahá'í teachers were careful not to be judgmental and were focused on listening to those to whom they brought this vital message.

We gave presentations at Bahá'í schools and conferences throughout the four states, bringing to these venues some useful traditions of Native culture, such as drumming and even the sharing of a sacred pipe by Bahá'í Indian friends. Because most of the non-Native Bahá'ís had never before been exposed to these basic aspects of Native culture, valid questions arose regarding rituals versus ceremonies, inasmuch as the Bahá'í Faith is quite purposefully devoid of rituals. Likewise, some concerns were discussed about traditional beliefs that some might consider superstitions, something else Bahá'u'lláh forbids.

The importance of these questions required all of us to examine carefully the Bahá'í Writings on these subjects, especially the relevant letters from the Universal House of Justice. And while satisfactory answers to most of the questions were found, a number of the same questions continue to arise today in regard to Native traditions and ceremonies in the context of the non-ritualistic nature of the Bahá'í Faith.

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11 See John E. Kolstoe, *Consultation, A Universal Lamp of Guidance*, especially pp. 8–9, and Judie Bopp, Michael Bopp, Lee Brown, and Phil Lane, *The Sacred Tree: Reflections on Native American Spirituality*, especially p. 78.



*Action*

With a mandate to create a state event, our RAITC organized the Heart of America Spiritual Gathering (1996–1999), which was held at the Bahá'í-owned Temerity Woods Retreat near Rolla, Missouri. The purpose of this epic four-day gathering<sup>12</sup> was to bring non-Bahá'í Indians and non-Indian Bahá'ís together in an atmosphere of physical, emotional, and spiritual “safety,” with the express goal of sharing and learning from one another’s culture. Although a direct spinoff from the well-known Gathering of Eagles, founded decades ago by a Native believer, in which teaching the Faith remains individual and indirect, the Heart of America Gathering visibly placed the Faith at the center of its activities.

Held each fall in September, the Gathering annually garnered up to one hundred participants from reservations and towns across the United States. Activities included presentations, traditional drumming and music, dawn prayers, storytelling, and the “Sacred Fire,” over which numerous friendships were forged and at which some attendees declared their intention to become Bahá'ís. Additionally, people could spend time at sweat

lodges, witness the building of a medicine wheel, eat a traditional meal prepared by the Omaha believers, and participate in a traditional Giveaway at the end of each Gathering.

Youth came from St. Louis to help prepare and serve the meals. Thirteen Native and non-Native individuals decided to join the Bahá'í Faith over the course of four years, and many long-lasting relationships were formed. Traditional adoption and naming ceremonies took place, and one traditional marriage occurred on the retreat grounds. In addition, three other gatherings modeled on the Heart of America Spiritual Gathering were organized in Bismarck, North Dakota, on the Omaha Reservation in Nebraska, and near Stone Mountain in Georgia. The Heart of America Spiritual Gathering, held annually and organized by other Baha'is after the dissolution of the RAITC, ended in 2008.

One derivative of the Gathering was the organization of “The Nunavut Project: A Journey to the Arctic’s Peoples.” This travel-teaching project teamed up ten participants from the Gathering to go to Nunavut, Canada, a self-governing territory of the Inuit. Its purpose was to fulfill the directives from the Universal House of Justice in its Ridván 153 Message to “travel to the circumpolar regions” and to “seize the moment.”<sup>13</sup> This project ran

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12 People typically arrived early and left late, so the Gathering actually ran a week or more in length. Some participants stayed on for months, renting one of the cabins and becoming immersed in the local Bahá'í community.

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13 Universal House of Justice, Ridván 153 Message (April 1996): “May you all arise to seize the tasks of this crucial moment. May each inscribe his or her

from 2000 to 2008 and involved four separate trips, beginning in 2004, by different team members to Nunavut, each giving presentations in businesses, schools, cultural centers, nursing homes, women's shelters, and a youth detention center. Exemplifying the principle of unity in diversity that characterizes the Bahá'í community worldwide, teams were composed of White, Black, and Native believers. Funds were raised from Local Spiritual Assemblies and individuals supporting the project, which itself took place under the guidance of Nunavut's first Regional Teaching Committee (RTC).

EXPERIENTIAL REFLECTION:  
THEN AND NOW

Arising to serve, as the members of all the RAITCs did, might be likened to one small stone being dropped into still water. Its effect propagates through ever-widening circles of energy that are potentially all-encompassing and ceaseless. Please note that this historical accounting does not concern just one RAITC and its members' experiences. Multiply our experiences by the hundreds of other RAITCs' experiences, and then multiply that by the thousands of experiences gained over numerous decades through the efforts of non-Native believers on and off the reservations. Add in all the knowledge gained by the various Indian teaching

committees and the support materials they created throughout the years. Finally, add all the experiential lessons shared by the Native believers. Reflecting on all these "ripple effects" will disclose an intricate collage of widespread, deep, meaningful, and consistent Bahá'í teaching work within the American Indian community spanning decades.

It may not be readily apparent to the larger Bahá'í community, but the Indigenous teaching work of Bahá'ís over the past decades has had, and will continue to have, a lasting impact on the future of this most vital relationship within the North American Bahá'í community, unleashing over time the barely tapped influence of these deeply spiritual peoples. I am moved with profound gratefulness, appreciation, and awe for the massive amount of sacrifice and work, effort and struggle, success—and yes, in many instances, failure—experienced by the early pioneers to the reservations; for the embryonic institutes and committees composed of individuals who dared to try their best despite having limited knowledge or training in the Indigenous teaching fields they so willingly entered; and for the courage and audacity it took for the early Native believers to accept and embrace the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh by stepping outside their comfort zones of traditions, customs, culture, and even family.

Still, more is needed. For example, scholarly studies, autobiographies, narratives, and acknowledgements of achievements are needed regarding the

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own mark on a brief span of time so charged with potentialities and hope for all humanity...."

Indigenous Bahá'ís of North America. Recently, a number of authors have published their Bahá'í-themed and Native-related dissertations, theses, and books, but these efforts are a tiny fraction of the sort of research and discourse that needs to take place. After all, there is much to acknowledge. Five American Indians have been elected by the entire United States Bahá'í community to serve on the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States: Franklin Kahn, Chester Kahn, Kevin Locke, Patricia Locke, and Jacqueline Left Hand Bull. Patricia Locke,<sup>14</sup> the first Native American woman to be elected to this body, was the winner of a 1991 MacArthur Fellowship for her lifelong work to preserve Indigenous North American languages. In 2011 a moving biography of the life of the first Native Bahá'ís in Canada was published: Evelyn Loft Watts and Patricia Verge's *Return to Tyendinaga: The Story of Jim and Melba Loft*. Similarly, First Nations Bahá'ís have served on the Canadian National Spiritual Assembly.

But there is so much more that can be done—that needs to be done—by way of spreading abroad accounts of the sacrificial efforts of the early Bahá'í pioneers who taught the Native peoples, as well as histories of the contributions made by the Indigenous peoples to the Bahá'í community of North America. Their stories need to be told and shared.

#### ARISE WITH DESIRE

The Nunavut Project produced the action booklet *Arise in His Name*, which was based on Shoghi Effendi's "Five Steps of Prayer" and designed to allow individuals to identify and achieve their own personal teaching goals. On the one hand, arising requires the simple act of self-determination, but it implies more—it cannot stop there if the effort is to be fruitful. Shoghi Effendi states, "Have determination to carry the decision through. Many fail here. The decision, budding into determination, is blighted and instead becomes a wish or vague longing. When determination is born, immediately take the next step" (qtd. in *Bahá'í Prayers* 126–27).

Bahá'u'lláh Himself said, "Whoso ariseth to teach Our Cause must needs detach himself from all earthly things, and regard, at all times, the triumph of Our Faith as his supreme objective" (*Gleanings* 157:2). When speaking to an audience in London, 'Abdu'l-Bahá stated His desire that we all become spiritual warriors: "I pray for all of you, that you may become celestial warriors, that you may everywhere spread the Unity of God and enlighten the East and West, and that you may give to all hearts the love of God. This is my utmost desire, and I pray to God that your desire may be the same" (*Abdu'l-Bahá in London* 46).

Finally, I am reminded of a visit to a First Nations believer's home near Winnipeg, Manitoba, who had just become a Bahá'í along with his

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14 Her picture is included in this issue.

non-Native wife. Their home was across the border from Bismarck, where one of the Gatherings had just ended. Although it entailed a long drive, the new believers asked us to accompany them to their home for their first Nineteen Day Feast<sup>15</sup> that evening. After we had settled into the Feast, the husband's older brother arrived unexpectedly. The new believer happily told his brother that he had become a Bahá'í that day. His brother, nonplussed at this news, said, "Yes, I became a Bahá'í twenty years ago—and I've not seen a Bahá'í since!" However, in all those years the older brother had never mentioned the Faith to his younger brother. It was such a surprise—such a happy occasion, and yet also quite sad.

It is a point worth noting that hundreds of Indigenous people accepted the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith during the sixties and seventies on reservation and reserves. Through no fault of their own, at the time there was not an adequate and systematic process in place for consolidating these communities. Fortunately, over the past twenty years "the institute

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15 Bahá'ís hold a community gathering the first day of each month, according to the Bahá'í calendar, which consists of nineteen months of nineteen days each. These are called "Feasts" and consist of prayers and readings from the Bahá'í Scriptures, followed by administrative reports and consultation, and concluding with social activities and the sharing of food.

process"<sup>16</sup> has been developed under the guidance of the Universal House of Justice as a framework for action. Now we have the knowledge and the tools of Ruhi. We also have the essential historical record of experiences to reflect upon, meditate upon, and provide us with another form of guidance for reaching Indigenous peoples in every corner of "Turtle Island"—North America. Never again need the fire of passionate response to the message of Bahá'u'lláh flicker and die because of a lack of human resources or a workable plan for building community life.

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16 According to the Ridván 153 Message given by the Universal House of Justice, "Training institutes and other centers of learning are an indispensable element of a sustained endeavor to advance this process, and to ensure that the essential deepening of new believers is not neglected, that they develop the necessary skills to effectively teach the Faith, and that an opportunity is provided for all Bahá'ís, new and veteran, to embark on a systematic study of the fundamental verities of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh."

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Hand of the Cause Dhikru'llah Khadem and Bahá'ís from 34 Native American tribes at Great Council Fire in Arizona, February 1963.

(Photo courtesy of National Bahá'í Archives, United States)