

## Caroline Lehmann: First Bahá'í in West Gravenhurst

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Published with approval

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Caroline Lehmann  
Nee Yaekel  
November 1846 – May 1940



Susan Gammage visiting Caroline Lehmann's gravesite

<sup>1</sup> Prepared by David Bowie (2023) for posting, with permission of author, at [https://bahai-library.com/gammage\\_various\\_essays](https://bahai-library.com/gammage_various_essays)

Presentation on the 25th Anniversary of the Gravenhurst Bahá'í Community  
25 March 2000

There are different milestones in the evolution of a Bahá'í community, and today we remember the arrival 25 years ago of the first Bahá'í pioneer, Francis Cowan, in Gravenhurst, and the development of the local Bahá'í community since then.

When our Assembly was in the middle of planning this event last summer, someone discovered in the back cover of the 1934-36 Bahá'í World Volume a map of the United States and Canada, showing localities where Bahá'ís resided as of May 1st, 1935. There were 229 localities in all, only 8 of which were situated in Canada, scattered right across the land: there was an Assembly in Montreal and one in Vancouver (with at least 9 Bahá'ís in each), and centers with only 1 isolated believer (meaning very lonely Bahá'í) living there, -- one in Alberta, one in Saskatchewan, one in New Brunswick, one in Prince Edward Island, and two in Ontario: one in Toronto, and the other -- lo and behold -- in WEST GRAVENHURST! We got out a magnifying glass to make sure we were seeing right, and sure enough, there it was.

This meant that the history of the Gravenhurst Bahá'í community had obviously started much earlier than we realized, and that there was another milestone to be uncovered here. The search for this early believer began immediately, and what followed had all the characteristics of a true detective story.

Our first move was to put an ad in BAHÁ'I CANADA (September 1999 issue), inviting anyone with information about this believer to contact us, but -- not surprisingly -- no one did. Next, we contacted the Records Department and Archives Office at the National Bahá'í Center in Toronto, but they could not help us either since their records go back only to 1948, when the Canadian National Spiritual Assembly came into existence. All prior records were still being kept at the National Bahá'í Center of the United States in Wilmette, Illinois.

Next, we searched in Dr. van den Hoonard's book, *The Origins of the Bahá'í Community of Canada*, for any clues about a believer in Gravenhurst, but found nothing there either.

In the meantime, we had started making inquiries with some of the senior citizens in town as to whether anyone remembered meeting a Bahá'í in the 1930's. But without knowing the name of the person we were looking for, nor even whether it was a man or a woman, this effort was going nowhere.

Eventually, we succeeded in obtaining the email address of Dr. van den Hoonard at the University of New Brunswick and asked for his assistance in identifying the believer who resided in West Gravenhurst as of May 1935. On the very next day (August 30) he responded as follows:

....you will be happy to know that the history of West Gravenhurst goes even further back! Between March 1916 and May 1940, Mrs. Caroline Lehmann lived in

West Gravenhurst. She was taught the Faith by Isabelle Brittingham. Her previous religion was Lutheran and she was of German background. You can find a reference for her in Bahá'í World (vol. 8: 699 [actually 703] and the [American] Bahá'í News (July 1940: 10).

This was the news we were hoping for, and now that we had a name, a gender, and a 24-year time frame, our search could begin in earnest.

There were a few Lehmanns listed in the local telephone book with which we could start. But then, on the same day as the above message arrived, one of my Red Cross Homemakers (Claudia) mentioned that her colleague's (Sherry Rheame) grandfather, who had passed away a few months earlier, was a Mr. Carl Lehman. As she was going to meet Sherry that night at the Leisure World Nursing Home, Claudia offered to ask her, whether Caroline Lehmann was any relation of hers.

Sherry had never heard of this name before, but was going to ask her grandmother (Carl Lehman's widow) about it. A couple of days later, Sherry gave Claudia the amazing news that Mrs. Caroline Lehmann was her very own great-great-grandmother!

It is interesting to note that Sherry was one of the Red Cross Homemakers assigned to me, when I first visited the Cowans in August 1997 in order to prepare my move to Gravenhurst. She lived just a block away from the Cowans and was known to Fran since her childhood. Sherry continued to provide homecare services to me for more than a year following my move to Lofty Pines Drive, and we had a good many conversations about her Bible studies as well as the Bahá'í Faith. She took some literature, as well as a Bahá'í colouring book and some balloons and prayer cards for her children. When her grandfather was ill, she borrowed the "Health and Healing" booklet, and when he passed away, she read the "Death -- Messenger of Joy" booklet and found it very comforting, particularly as she had also lost her father not long before that. After her grandfather's funeral, Sherry and I took a walk over to the Mickle Cemetery, just down the road from my place, and had some prayers at the Lehmann family grave. Little did we know then, that we were praying for the descendants (two sons and a grandson) of the first Bahá'í of Gravenhurst!

On 12 September 1999 I called Sherry's grandmother, Mrs. Lila Lehman, and she confirmed that Caroline was her great-grandmother-in-law, and that she had lived "in a pink house on the first farm on the right going towards Bala". She also said that Caroline and her husband had operated the General Store in Kilworthy (a suburb of Gravenhurst), and that they are both buried at the Kilworthy Lutheran Cemetery.

It was a beautiful Sunday, and Shapour Ostadi (a local Bahá'í friend) and I went looking for the pink farm house on the road to Bala. But nothing we saw there fitted that description. We then drove to Kilworthy, where we easily found the Kilworthy General Store. The present owners confirmed that it had indeed belonged to the Lehmanns, who had operated it until the late 1920s. Judging from its aged looks, it probably hasn't changed much since the times the Lehmanns had been there.

We received directions to the Lutheran Cemetery, which is located on top of a hill, in a bend near the end of Muskoka Road 19 (of all numbers!). It is a well-kept, peaceful place, surrounded by forest on three sides. We found the Lehmann grave near a low lilac bush, almost in the center of the cemetery. We were extremely moved to read on the gravestone that Caroline Lehmann (nee Yaekel) was born in 1845 -- just one year after the inception of the Bahá'í Faith -- and that she was 95 years old in 1940, when she passed away.

As such, her life spanned almost the entire first century of the Bahá'í Era and made her a contemporary of both the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, `Abdu'l-Bahá, and Shoghi Effendi! She was 71 years of age in 1916, when she accepted the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh, -- only 4 years after 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to Canada -- and was among the very first resident Canadians to do so. (According to Dr. van den Hoonard's book, there were only 31 Bahá'ís in the whole of Canada as of 1916, some of whom would no doubt have been pioneers from other countries)

Through her acceptance of Bahá'u'lláh, the light of God's new Revelation has dawned upon this small community of Gravenhurst only 72 years after the Faith began in Persia! This is all the more remarkable when one recalls how long it took all the other major world religions to reach Canadian shores.

Having come empty-handed, we gathered some wild flowers to put on her grave, and Shapour chanted some beautiful Persian prayers there, -- likely the first one to ever do so at that site.

Having solved the mystery of who this early West Gravenhurst believer was, our focus now shifted to learning more about her life and finding someone -- anyone -- who might still have a living memory of Caroline. Regrettably, her last living son, Carl, had passed away just a few months before we even knew about her existence. According to Sherry Rheume's own research, no one among the members of her family has any personal memory of her, nor do they have any photographs or other documentation of her life and activities. They did mention, however, that she was not the only Bahá'í here, but that another Bahá'í lady who had taught her the Faith was with her for some time, and they believe it may have been her sister.

The only person who still vaguely remembered the old Lehmanns was a Mrs. Hazel Schell, longtime resident of Kilworthy, and grandmother of Joan Allen, another one of my Homecare workers. I talked to her by telephone in late Fall 1999, and she confirmed to have met the old Lehmanns in her youth, but better recalled their daughter, Emily Beatty, who took over the Kilworthy Store from her parents. Hazel Schell, herself in her ninetieth year, passed away just a few weeks after we had this conversation.

Her grand-daughter, Joan Allan, had referred me to a book about Kilworthy, *A Legacy* almost lost, published by the Kilworthy Historical Committee, which contained several references to the Lehmanns. It also provided a fairly good picture of what life was like for the early pioneer settlers in the 19th century, when they were there.

The book contains a census of the Townships in Muskoka of the year 1871, in which Gustav and Caroline Lehman, and 2 of their children, are listed as having come from Prussia (East-Germany), and that they were then 39 and 23 years of age. It also shows that the Lehmanns had a farm "on the north shore of Sparrow Lake", and that Gustav Lehmann bought the Kilworthy Store in 1875 and started the first Post Office there in November 1876. Gustav Lehmann was Postmaster until 1914 and, in 1927, turned the Post Office and the Store over to his daughter, Emily Beatty. Apparently, he and Caroline then moved to the farm in West Gravenhurst, where Gustav passed away in 1929 and Caroline in 1940.

The case lay dormant over the winter but, during the Fast earlier this month (March 2000), Shapour and I ventured out once again in search of the "pink house" in West Gravenhurst. We rang some doorbells in the general area and were directed to 270 North Street, which turned out to be Carl Lehman's place. We took some pictures of their old house and also had an opportunity to briefly talk to his widow, Mrs. Lila Lehman, who said that Caroline visited that home on occasion and stayed there for one week, when her youngest son (Sherry's father) was born. She then gave us direction to the Lehmann farm, which is located about 2 miles further toward Bala, beyond the small convenience store and just around the bend on the right hand side. There is an old barn and a (green) house standing close to the road, and the old building on the back of that property was the Lehmann homestead. We found it to be a larger building with several added sections, yellowish in colour, empty, and in dilapidated condition. Only on the back did we see reddish siding that some people might consider "pink". No wonder we couldn't find it before! We photographed the building from all sides and had prayers there as well. (The address is lot #1272 on Highway 169, and the current tenants' name is Waggs).

We were determined to also find the first Lehmann farm on Sparrow Lake and, on the following day, called the Franklins who, according to the book about Kilworthy, had bought the farm from the Lehmanns.

We spoke to a Mrs. Harvey Franklin who said that the Lehmann farm had been purchased by her uncle and is the property where the Silver Pines Cottage Resort is now located, about 3 miles West from the Kilworthy store. Shapour and I went there and spoke with the proprietor, Andy Fisher, who confirmed that this was the old Lehmann farm, but that Lehmanns did not build the house on his property. He had acquired the place only 15 years ago and did not know where their homestead would have been.

We drove down to the lake and along the shoreline just to look around a bit, and there, about 2 lots away from the Silver Pines property, discovered a whole complex of very old abandoned farm-type buildings along a creek! The first one, though much smaller, looked strikingly similar in style, age, and colour to the Lehmann house we had seen in West Gravenhurst! We photographed it, of course, and went back to Andy Fisher to ask him about these buildings. He didn't seem to be aware of them nor who the present owners were, but he confirmed that the original farm was much larger than his current lot and had gone all the way over to the Delmonte Resort. This meant that the old buildings we had found were located well within the boundaries of the old farm.

We went back to the Kilworthy Store to ask the owners about the farm, and they directed us to Mr. Bruce Schulz, whose grandfather had bought the Kilworthy Store from Emily Beatty, Lehmann's daughter. Mr. Schulz is a member of the Kilworthy Historical Society who had published the book, and he was very interested in our research and in receiving a copy of our findings for the Kilworthy Archives. Although he had no information about the Lehmann farm on Sparrow Lake, he said that he would try to find out about it at their next meeting.

Last not least, a letter was received from the National Bahá'í Archives in the United States in response to my inquiry, forwarding copies of the references about Caroline in Bahá'í World Volume 8 and the July 1940 edition of the American Bahá'í News. The first is a Bahá'í Directory of 1938-40, and the second an "In Memoriam" notice of her passing in 1940. The Archives could not provide any additional information about her at this time, nor verify when and where Isabelle Brittingham and Caroline Lehmann might have met, and whether she might, in fact, have been the "other Bahá'í lady", who had stayed with Caroline, as remembered by her family.

Their letter (dated 16 March 2000) states that Caroline Lehmann "does not appear on the 1916, 1920 and 1922 membership lists maintained by the Bahá'í Temple Unity [precursor of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada]. However, the lists were sent in by local communities, so not all isolated believers were listed, unless they were near an active community." It also said that "the National Spiritual Assembly files are still not open so we cannot check if she corresponded with the National Spiritual Assembly." Consequently, it is possible that some information about Caroline Lehmann would eventually be found.

As for Caroline's resting place, we asked Mr. Bruce Schulz about the future of the old pioneer cemetery where the Lehmanns are buried, and what would happen to it. He assured us that it is there to stay and is presently being looked after by some individuals including himself, and that it would eventually be turned over to the Municipality for maintenance. No doubt, the historical significance of this gravesite will be publicly recognized in due course. (It should be noted in this context that Mrs. Lehmann would have retained her church membership until the time of her death as was common among early Bahá'ís living in Christian communities.)

I forwarded a shortened version of the above presentation to the Bahá'í Archives in Wilmette and, shortly thereafter received the following additional information.

Subject: RE: An early Gravenhurst believer  
Date: Thu, 30 Mar 2000 16:17:36 -0600  
Dear Ms. Lakshman,

Thank you for the information on Caroline Lehmann. I have come across some more information about Caroline Lehmann. She had filled out an historical record card in the mid-1930s. I am mailing a photocopy of the historical record card to you. In the card Mrs. Lehmann wrote that she became a Baha'i in March 1916 in New York City. She had been making visits to her daughter, Helen Lehmann, and

had learned of the Baha'i Faith. Isabella Brittingham<sup>i</sup>, Mother Beecher<sup>ii</sup> and Ali Kuli Khan<sup>iii</sup> had been her teachers. She also gives her birth date as November 17, 1846.

There is a Mrs. Helen Lehmann in the 1916 and 1920 New York City membership lists but not in the 1922 New York City membership list.

With warm greetings,  
Roger M. Dahl  
Archivist [The National Baha'i Archives of the United States]

The copy of the handwritten historical record card was received and is the first personal document we have of this early believer. In 2003, a black & white negative of Caroline Lehmann's photograph, which she had attached to the history card, was also provided by the U.S. Bahá'í Archives. The negative was digitally cleaned-up and several prints were made.

Both photograph and copy of the historical record card were included with a shortened story and other documents and pictures in the Lehmann binders forwarded in 2003/2004 to the following institutions.

The National Bahá'í Archives of Canada  
The National Bahá'í Archives of the United States  
The Local Spiritual Assembly of Gravenhurst  
The Archives of the Town of Gravenhurst  
The Sparrow Lake Historical Society  
Kilworthy Historical Committee

Last edited:  
September 2007  
Heidi Lakshman

### This Century

In the ages to come, though the Cause of God may rise and grow hundredfold and the shade of the Sadratu'l-Muntahá (Tree of Life) shelter all mankind, yet this present (20th) century shall stand unrivalled, for it hath witnessed the breaking of that Morn and the rising of that Sun.

This century is, verily, the source of His Light and the dayspring of His Revelation. Future ages and generations shall behold the diffusion of its radiance and the manifestations of its signs. (Selections from the Writings of `Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 67

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<sup>i</sup> One of the first believers in the United States, called the "Bahá'í-Maker" by `Abdu'l-Bahá

<sup>ii</sup> Grandmother of Hand of the Cause, Dorothy Baker

<sup>iii</sup> Secretary of `Abdu'l-Bahá, and Persian Consul to the United States