
BERTHA

An early American Bahá'í stalwart.

Religions owe much to stalwarts in the early days who lay the foundations of their Faith in towns and villages. Bertha Kirkpatrick was one such person in the United States. DUANE L. HERRMANN describes her quiet achievements.

Bertha Hyde Kirkpatrick has earned place in the literary and educational history of the American Bahá'í community — but deserves greater recognition. She played important roles in the life of two major Bahá'í publications and was among those who initiated an institution the Guardian, Shoghi Effendi, would acclaim as a major educational and cultural centre of the community.

She won over to the Bahá'í Faith a Congregational minister who had spent years antagonistic to the Faith and helped establish the first Bahá'í Spiritual Assembly of Ann Arbor.

Despite these accomplishments, she remains generally unknown.

Bertha Hyde Kirkpatrick was born in Rockville, Connecticut, on June 16 1874, into a devout Christian family. Her father was the Rev. Henry F. Hyde, pastor of the Rockville Congregational Church. Bertha learned that belief must be backed by action and that one's first understanding of some information was usually not the mature understanding one could eventually attain.

When she was six her father died. The family, with five children, was left destitute and eked out a living by taking in boarders. Despite the struggle, four of the children eventually graduated from college. Bertha graduated from Holyoke in 1898. For the next 10 years she taught science in schools in Connecticut, New York and Pennsylvania.

In 1908 she agreed to come to Topeka, Kansas where her brother,

Arthur Hyde, taught history at Washburn College. His wife had died that September, leaving him on his own with a young son. Bertha came to help out. She was hired to teach science the next autumn at Central Park Elementary School, a position she would hold for the next 11 years. Also, in 1908, a second member of the Washburn history faculty was hired, Dr. John E. Kirkpatrick. Being her brother's closest colleague, they also got to know each other well.

It is likely that Bertha's sister, Mabel Paine, was the first of the two to hear of the Bahá'í Faith when she attended a talk by Lua Getsinger in Urbana, Illinois in 1912. It could not have been long before she shared the news with Bertha, who was deeply attracted but puzzled. Finally the realisation dawned on her: here was the return of Christ. By 1915 both had accepted the new faith.

Bertha was the second Bahá'í to live in Topeka. The first, Rose Hilty, who had been there since 1906 returned to her hometown of Enterprise, Kansas in 1916. The two may not have known each other till later. Bertha's contact with Bahá'ís in Urbana brought travelling Bahá'í teachers to Topeka and by 1919 at the "second Bahá'í Teaching Convention of the Central States", Albert Vail could report on "new and joyous groups" in several cities, including Topeka. The group was fairly active. Bertha was treasurer. Also that year Bertha signed a "supplication" to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, along with 1130 other American Bahá'ís.

Rose Hilty moved back to Topeka from Enterprise in 1920, in time to help with arrangements for the teaching visit of Jenab-i-Fadil. He arrived on December 18 from Lincoln, Nebraska. The Bahá'ís were able to schedule five meetings and a reception for the two days he was in town. Several interested individuals were found and plans were set in motion to resume the Bahá'í study class.

When the 1921-22 school year ended, Bertha left Topeka and settled two years later in Olivet, Michigan, married to Dr. Kirkpatrick. He was now teaching at Olivet College. The years in Olivet were quiet ones, once the truce was drawn not to discuss religion. John, before teaching, was ordained a Congregational minister in Seabrook, Kansas in 1895. When he first heard of the Bahá'í Faith, he found it strange and uncomfortable. To investigate further, he wrote to the author of a thesis on the Faith.

The reply from Neal Alter that accompanied a copy of the thesis was negative and unfortunate. On the belief that he was being impartial, Alter had made efforts to, "know all the important people who belong to each faction and I am convinced Muhammad Alie (sic) is in the right in the quarrel for leadership after the death of 'Abdu'l-Bahá." His treachery and status as a covenant-breaker (a Bahá'í who disputed the authority of Bahá'u'lláh) was not understood. Alter's conclusion that "Bahá'ísm is so vile..." stayed with John to the end of his life. Bertha would not compromise her beliefs, though in the first years of their marriage she was not as involved as earlier. They agreed to disagree.

Her husband became ill in the late '20s and by 1931 his condition was critical. They travelled to Topeka to be near his family and doctor. Even after he was hospitalised they continued a practice begun much earlier. In addition to study of the Bible, they had added the Bahá'í

writings, particularly *The Divine Art of Living*, compiled by Bertha's sister, Mabel Paine.

In a letter to a friend, Bertha later



COURTESY OF SYLVIA FARMALLEE & OLIN KARCH

Bertha Hyde Kirkpatrick in the garden of her home on Olivet, Michigan.

wrote of John's last days. "Before dawn on the day before his ascension I was called to his bedside. He signified his desire for pencil and paper. Slowly his weakened hand, unable to hold the pencil without aid, formed the almost illegible words, "One thing only, to be a good —' Then for a moment there seemed to be a great influx of strength and spirit as with firm hand he completed the sentence with the word, Bahá'í, in large clear letters." ▶

It was his last significant communication; evidence of a radical change of heart and fulfilment of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's assurance to Bertha of a "spiritual victory".

This confirmation stimulated her service to the Faith. That summer Bertha was one of the Bahá'ís who initiated and planned the first session of Louhelen Bahá'í School. The next year she was appointed to the school committee and was reappointed every year for the rest of the life. Most of those 16 years she was the secretary. In that capacity she wrote often to the Guardian to appraise him of plans, ask for guidance or report accomplishments. Most of his statements about Louhelen are from letters sent to her.

For a time during the winter of 1931-32 she was the "resident teacher" in Ann Arbor to help the new Assembly.

In addition to the school committee, she was appointed, from 1935-1938, to the "index committee", with the purpose of compiling or creating a master index to the Bahá'í writings and from 1938-1940, she was a member of the regional teaching committee.

In 1927 she had begun writing for *Star of the West* and continued to write as the name was changed to *The Bahá'í Magazine* and then, *World Order*. In 1927 she was appointed "assistant editor". For the next 15 years she was also a member of the editorial board. Most of her articles were signed simply: B.H.K. Her literary abilities were further recognised in 1940 when she was asked to assist with the production of *The Bahá'í World* volumes, beginning with volume IX. She served in these capacities to the end of her life.

To her last days, her efforts were in service to the Faith. On Sunday, 15 May, 1948, on the way home to Olivet from a school committee meeting at Louhelen, her car in which she was a passenger, went out of control and veered into the lane of an approaching car. Three people were killed instantly. Bertha died the next Thursday of internal injuries. Bertha's services of more than 30 years to the cause of Bahá'u'lláh had come to an end.

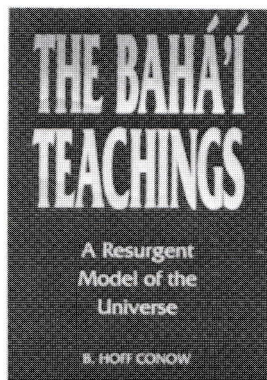
Bertha Hyde Kirkpatrick's contributions to the American Bahá'í community were many, varied and invaluable. How many souls did she help confirm and deepen through her articles in *World Order*? What would the American Bahá'í community be without Louhelen? All are testimonies to her years of dedication. ■

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