

Elizabeth and Elsbeth: Typically Extraordinary Kansas Women

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Kanhistique: Kansas History & Antiques

September 1997

Kansas has been, from its earliest years, full of extraordinary women, so many that their presence is taken for granted by their families, friends and neighbors. They are taken for granted to such an extent they have largely vanished from history. This imbalance creates the impression that they only important people in our past are men. This is not true.

The following sketch is about Elizabeth Killius Frey and her daughter Elsbeth, two typically extraordinary Kansas women. Their lives are representative of the thousands of other women who gave selflessly of their time and energy for their families and communities. Unfortunately, much has already vanished about their lives. The traces that remain include census information, brief memoirs, obituaries and other scattered bits of information. Despite the deficiency of information, a picture emerges of two woman who made significant contributions.

The mother was born Elizabeth Killius to George and Ursula Killius on March 1, 1858, in Havana, Illinois. At age 17, she traveled to Kansas and lived near Detroit with a sister. For a time, she taught school; then, in 1882, married James Frey. The 1900 census indicates that James was born in Switzerland and immigrated to the U.S. in 1881. By the turn of the century, he was the Postmaster in Enterprise, Kansas (his wife was Assistant Postmaster), owned his own home and could read and write. The daughter, Elsbeth, was then a “student.”

Mr. Frey’s appointment as Postmaster made headlines in July 1897: “POSTMASTER CHANGES, James Frey Gets the Enterprise Postoffice.” This was only one change of that summer. That same month the Freys were invited by Barbara Ehram, wife of Jacob Ehram, co-founder of the town and a prominent citizen, to the classes in her home which established the Baha’i Faith in Kansas. Barbara had opened the first store, before the town was founded, and Jacob, after helping get the Hoffman Mills in operation, had opened his own machine shop which stayed in business until the summer of 1996.

Barbara Ehram had sent her oldest daughter to Chicago for musical training (she eventually sang on the stage in Europe), and while there heard of Ibrahim Kheiralla, a religious teacher and “healer.” In 1892, he had come from Egypt to make his fortune. After a few years he capitalized on the interest in “healers,” bought a medical degree and set up practice. To this were added classes about the Baha’i Faith.

Elizabeth Frey's name is on an early list as being a believer. Little is known of her activities with other Baha'is; that may be due in part to devoting her time to raising a second family after her own children were grown. In January 1901, both a brother and his wife, living in Illinois, died. Elizabeth traveled to their home and brought the three children back to Enterprise. Their ages ranged from nine years to eight months; her youngest, Elsbeth, was 14. So completely were the orphans adopted into the family that when Elsbeth died the youngest cousin was described as, "a sister." Mrs Frey's obituary testified that she gave to the three orphans "her love and life, with the same degree of devotion that she had to those of her own flesh and blood." And in return, "she enjoyed an unusual confidence from her children." After Elsbeth's husband died in the influenza epidemic in 1919, Elizabeth raised their son while Elsbeth taught school.

Mrs. Frey's religious nature was a major feature of her character. The obituary described her faith as being "daily refreshed by believing prayer," her loving kindness to friends and neighbors was noted and "even in illness she was thinking of others and praying for those she regarded as less fortunate than she."

A high point in their lives occurred in 1912 when both women traveled to Chicago. That year the head of the Baha'i Faith came to North America and laid the cornerstone for the Baha'i House of Worship. Mother and daughter met him in the Plaza Hotel. The day of the dedication was wet, windy and cold, so Mrs. Frey stayed in the hotel while Elsbeth was photographed attending the ceremony.

Both women continued their affiliation and support of the Baha'i Faith long after most of the others in Enterprise had lost interest. Elsbeth said her mother was one of only two of the original Baha'i class to "remain faithful to the end." Ledger books show that Mrs. Frey made financial contributions to the Baha'is. According to a long-time resident of Enterprise, she also held "religious meetings" in her home, a common practice in Baha'i communities where there are few believers. After teaching in Enterprise, Elsbeth taught in St. Joseph, Mo., then returned to Denver. In the 1950s, she returned to Kansas for a Baha'i conference in Wichita and remained faithful till her death in 1970. Both are buried in Enterprise cemetery.

From these spare beginnings, the Kansas Baha'i community now embraces more than a hundred communities across the state. In 1997, the Kansas Baha'i Centennial is being celebrated. Ordinary people such as Elizabeth and Elsbeth made it possible.

Near the end of 1928 Elizabeth became ill with a terminal disease, described as "a deadly malady," and went to live her last months with a son in Kansas City. Eventually, "all that modern science and loving hands could do proved no avail and on April 9, 1930, at 10 minutes past 4 o'clock on a beautiful quiet afternoon, which was in keeping with her whole life, she peacefully returned to her Maker."

It is doubtful she ever dreamed anyone in the future would be interested in her life, or that of her daughter, they just did what needed to be done: two typically extraordinary Kansas women.