

PROCLAIM THE NEW NAME

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from *Twisting Topeka*

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The new hats for 1909 featured wide brims holding up piles of ribbons and possibly a feather for excitement. Dresses were floor length, with long, slim lines. A three room house in Topeka rented for \$6.00 a month, a five room for \$13.00. A two story, six room house, just two years old, with a bathroom and good barn, was for sale on Clay street for \$2,550. The Hilty family lived at 829 Monroe.

They had been living in Topeka for three years, having moved from Enterprise, KS, so their daughter, Lovelia, could attend Topeka High School. She had earlier attended the Kansas School for the Blind, so far away no one felt she should travel back and forth on the train alone. And, she didn't like it there.

The move had meant leaving baby Iona alone in her grave, but Lovelia's needs were greater. She is twenty-one now and has to be able to support herself; we certainly can't. Felicia reflected. But, now that Leonard has the Apex Café, we have more steady income.

Louella has been married for six years now. We no longer needed to worry about her. Being blind, Lovelia is another matter.

These were her thoughts that evening of May 18, 1909, as she cleaned up after supper. Leonard was reading the evening paper, the *Topeka State Journal*.

"Look at this," Leonard said to her as he pointed to a headline. "It says the Bahá'ís are going to build a temple. This wasn't mentioned in the class we attended in my mother's home." Together they had attended this class in 1897, in Enterprise. The teacher had given the name of the religion only to those who, at the end of the class, had stated that they had agreed with the teachings. Leonard had said it didn't make any difference to him.

The teachings were not difficult: there is one God, the Creator, who has a personal relationship with humanity and periodically sends special Messengers to guide humanity, including Moses, Jesus and now Bahá'u'lláh, each the fulfillment of the one before, the "return" so to speak. Now, here was news of it in the *Journal*.

Mother Ehrsam and Mrs. Frey, who had also attended, are so far away, Felicity regretted. She recited the First Commune. She knew prayer was important and she tried to live in a manner that was worthy; but with no other believers around, it was difficult. She wished there was a book she could read, but she didn't know of any.

The dateline of the article was Chicago, Ten years earlier Felicity had planned a trip there to learn more, but the need for surgery had prevented it. She had recovered fine, but the urgency for the trip had diminished and later there was no time or money. Financial difficulties seemed never to end.

Once Leonard had to declare bankruptcy and twice his paying with bad checks made things worse. She had wanted to learn more about her religion, but there was no time.

Abilene had seemed like a big town, but not nearly as large and confusing as Topeka. Still, they had settled in and learned their way around the Capital City.

She finished reading the news article: “The temple to be called ‘Mashrak-El-Azcar,’ will be a mixture of modern and Oriental architecture. It will be modeled after a similar temple in Eshkabad, Russia, the plans for which were drawn by Baha-Ullah, father of the Abdul-Baha of Galilee, the present prophet and leader...

Felicia tried to imagine such a building, but she could not. *How could a design combine contemporary and Eastern elements? Would there be arches? A dome? Columns and pillars?*

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, she remembered. In 1905, the year before we moved to Topeka, I signed a petition with hundreds of others around the country, asking Him to come to America.

“Nine walls and nine fountains...” *That would be interesting, she mused. A nine-sided building — the shape would be nearly round.* She clipped the article and put it away, then became involved in other things. Strawberries were blooming and the first lettuce and radishes were ready to pick. Her life was in full swing once more. There was hardly time to pause.

The next summer she was surprised again. “UNCLE SAM ISSUES RELIGION BULLETIN, was a headline on Sunday, August 14, 1910, in the *Topeka Daily Capital*, the morning paper. A paragraph several down the column was even more surprising than the one on the temple had been the year before. It mentioned the Bahá’í Faith:

“This is a comparatively new sect, growing out of the teaching of a Persian leader of the middle of the last century named Ali Mehammed. He claimed to be the forerunner ‘of him whom God would manifest.’ And called himself ‘Bab’ or ‘the Gate.’ Later came Baha Ulla, who claimed to be the one whose coming had been foretold, and from him the real name of the body is derived. In 1906 he had 1,280 followers in the United States who worshipped in 24 places through 14 states. They teach tolerance, love, charity and regard all religions as divine. Hence, they profess not to interfere with the ordinary doctrinal beliefs of their members.”

Are there others in Kansas besides Enterprise and Topeka? Who would know?

Felicity had to put these questions aside and take care of daily needs. Lovelia had been giving violin recitals and concerts. She needed to advertise her ability to play in order to draw students for lessons. Teaching music, violin and voice, was a way of earning an income despite being blind. Her first concert was in May 1911 in Topeka. Later, in December, she gave one in Valley Falls where her mother was born and family still lived. Newspaper in both cities praised her ability. The concerts attracted students. This was good.

After the December concert, Felicity was looking through the new issue of *Everybody’s* and came to the story, “The Light in the Lantern.” The entire story, several pages with illustrations, was all

about ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and his home! The author had visited Him and written about the visit. Felicity was so startled that she wrote to her mother-in-law, who also subscribed, and to her friend, Mrs. Frey, both in *Enterprise*.

Her mother-in-law commented on the article, Mrs. Frey’s answer surprised her. She stated that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá would be coming to the United States the next spring. She and her daughter, Elsbeth, were making plans see Him in Chicago. Did Felicity want to join them?

Leonard agreed, but she still had concerns.

“You must be sure to have money in the bank to cover every check,” she admonished. “I won’t be here to keep track for you.” He glumly nodded.

“And Lovelia,” Felicity paused. “What if she gets hit again?” Three years before, a driver had hit her and sped on. No one ever found out who did it. The car had only grazed Lovelia, but she was badly bruised. She had been nineteen then, young enough to bounce back quickly, but *what about next time*, her mother wondered.

“Don’t you ever tell her that,” Leonard warned. “She’ll think we won’t trust her to go out by herself.”

“I know, I know, but I still worry.” Felicity let the matter drop. Three days later she was able to find peace with the decision to go.

“You seem particularly happy, Mother,” Lovelia remarked that morning.

“I just had the most amazing dream last night,” Felicity answered. “‘Abdu’l-Bahá was in it.”

“I’m glad, Mother,” Lovelia walked up to her mother and gave her a hug.

“You’re such a lover,” her mother said and hugged her in return.

“That’s what the kids called me at school,” Lovelia giggled.

“Called you *what*?”

“Lover,” she giggled some more. “It was kind of cute.”

Lovelias would be later be known in the family as “Auntie Lover.”

Felicity and Mrs. Frey wrote back and forth to make sure they would be on the same train and stay in the same hotel. On the big day, Leonard drove Felicity to the train station. Elsbeth stuck her head out of the window to signal Felicity which car to board. Mrs. Frey wasn’t quite as audacious. The three of them settled in together for the ride.

“Have you heard what happened to the Titanic?” Felicity asked.

“Such a tragedy,” Mrs. Frey remarked.

“Someone wrote me that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was offered passage on the Titanic,” Elsbeth said. “He declined and booked passage on the Cedric instead.”

“Really?” Felicity was surprised. *Could He have known?*

They had brought food to eat: boiled eggs, sandwiches, and fruit. None of them quite trusted the food on the train. Besides, it was expensive.

Conversation turned to the class in Enterprise all those years ago.

“Our teacher really was not well informed,” Mrs. Frey said. “He had learned of the Truth while in Egypt, but made up a lot himself.

“When he went to Haifa,” Elsbeth added. “With the first group of pilgrims, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá tried to correct him, and he seemed to agree. But, after the group returned, he resumed his idea of being the Head of the Faith in America. That was simply not possible. Bahá’u’lláh had written out who was to be the Head of the Faith, it was ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. No one could change that.”

“I see,” Felicity said. This was another detail she hadn’t known.

“It is through the Covenant of Bahá’u’lláh that we turn to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá now,” Mrs. Frey added. “No one else.”

“And ‘Abdu’l-Bahá can’t change that,” Elsbeth added.

“Then our teacher renounced ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and tried to start his own religion,” Mrs. Frey added.

“There was confusion all around,” Elsbeth continued. “Mother and I are the only ones in Enterprise who remained interested.”

“Except for Mrs. Ehram,” Mrs. Frey added.

“She only has a slight interest now,” Elsbeth protested. “Not like before.”

“It’s sad that her interest waned,” said Mrs. Frey regretfully. “We were such a nice little band of believers.”

“‘Abdu’l-Bahá is going to dedicate the Temple site,” Elsbeth said. “That is one reason He’s coming. The land is on the shore of Lake Michigan, just north of Chicago in the village of Wilmette. It will be beautiful.”

“Nine entrances will show that people can come from all directions and meet in unity to worship the One Creator,” Elsbeth continued. “It will be unique.”

The day and scenery passed. Once they went past a pasture with cows and calves. The cows calmly continued to eat, but the calves bounded away. *We must seem like some kind of monster to them,* Felicity thought. *Poor things.* Another time, deer stood in the shadows of trees some distance from the track and watched the train go by.

The night was spent uncomfortably sitting and trying to sleep, but they did sleep some. Once, when the train stopped to let on some new passengers, Felicity roused enough to feel sorry for those who boarded the train in the middle of the night. *They must be in some great hurry not to wait for morning.*

In the afternoon of the second day, the women arrived in Chicago. They were greeted by members of the convention Reception Committee who directed them to the Entertainment Committee, whose members had hotel and other room accommodation information. One member gave them directions to their hotel and secured a hack to deliver them there. Upon arrival, all three refreshed themselves and took short naps. They were too tired and dirty to think yet about supper.

They had signed up for the Rizwan Feast which would be held that evening. The next morning, Sunday, April 28, the convention would begin. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was to speak at the convention *and* dedicate the Temple site. He would also greet people in his hotel suite in the evenings. The women determined to see him as often as possible.

Elsbeth woke from her nap before the others and went to explore the hotel. She found a reading nook off the lobby with local newspapers. In one, she found an article about ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Excited, she took it up to the room to show the others.

“Mother, Felicity!” she exclaimed, seeing they were waking up. “Listen to this.” She read:

“‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the leader of the impressive Bahá’í movement which has sprung up to the Mohammedan world, is coming to Chicago this month to attend — strange to say — the international conference of the people of his faith...”

“It is a pity that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has to talk through an interpreter. It would be hard to find anybody coming out of the Mohammedan world whose views of Christianity and the Western World would be more interesting or even impressive. The Bahá’í movement, with its large generalizations of the universal brotherhood of man, the unity of all religions and creeds, and of universal tolerance and peace, affords a splendid scale upon which to measure Western achievements. But this can’t be easily conveyed through an interpreter.”

“There’s a photograph of Him, too,” Elsbeth added. She held the paper so the others could see it; a kindly face, with loving eyes and a wide brow under a simple kind of hat, not quite a turban, above a white beard. He looked like one who had suffered, but bore no ill-will to anyone. He had been born into an aristocratic family who had lost everything for their beliefs, even their homeland. He had seen the result of the torture inflicted upon His father, He had lost two brothers, one an infant, the other a young man. He, Himself, had been pelted with stones as a young boy.

“Under it,” Elsbeth continued, “the caption says:

“The Persian philosopher and leader has arrived in New York. He was born in Teheran in 1844. His father was a prince of Persia’s royal line, who gave up his position to strive for the regeneration of man. For advocating liberal ideas he was thrown into prison, and his young son ‘Abdu’l-Bahá went with him. In 1908, after the Young Turks came to power, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was released and at once took up the work of his father. He estimates the number of his followers at about 2,000,000, about 5,000 of these being in this country. The basis of his teachings is human solidarity. He believes that all nations and religions should be united. His followers include Catholics, Protestants, Jews and Mohammedans. He will lecture in various cities and will attend the International Peace Conference at Lake Mohonk.”

“Well!” exclaimed Mrs. Frey. “What do you think of that, Felicity?”

“I’m impressed. Neither of the Topeka papers had anything like that, that I saw. Can we keep it here so we can thoroughly read it?”

“I don’t know why not,” Elsbeth answered. “We won’t take it out of the hotel.”

This was the most Felicity had read of the Bahá’í teachings. There had been no book for the class she had attended in Enterprise, just a small pamphlet which they all passed around. This news article and the opportunity to discuss it, clarified a lot of her thoughts and questions.

“Dear...” Mrs. Frey turned to Felicity. “There are more books now than when we were in the class. And the magazine, *Star of the West*. You really have been out of touch since you’ve been in Topeka.”

“I guess so.” Felicity answered. “Can you help me get more while we’re here?”

“Sure we can,” Elsbeth joined in.

The next few days were a blur for Felicity, with the convention and seeing more other Bahá’ís than she had ever imagined existed in one place. And, of course, she saw ‘Abdu’l-Bahá Himself.

At the closing session He addressed the convention:

“Among the institutes of the Holy Books is that of the foundation of places of worship. That is to say, an edifice or temple is to be built in order that humanity might find a place of meeting, and this is to be conducive to unity and fellowship among them. The real temple is the very Word of God; for to it all humanity must turn...”

He presented a dramatic vision to Western eyes. His layered robes immediately attracted attention. As He paced, gestured and spoke, pausing frequently for the interpreter, Felicity wished that a translator was not necessary. She simply wanted to listen to those words pour over her. She found it difficult to believe that He was, truly, nearly seventy years old; that He had been out of prison for only four years; that He had been a prisoner since He was ten years old; that He had no formal education... It was too much to take in!

She turned her attention back to His words:

“Temples are the symbols of the divine uniting force so that when the people gather there in the House of God they may recall the fact that the law has been revealed for them and that the law is to unite them. They will realize that just as this temple was founded for the unification of mankind, the law preceding and creating it came forth in the manifest Word. Jesus Christ, addressing Peter, said, ‘Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church.’ This utterance was indicative of the faith of Peter, signifying: This faith of thine, O Peter, is the very cause and message of unity to the nations; it shall be the bond of union between the hearts of men and the foundation of the oneness of the world of humanity. In brief, the original purpose of temples and houses of worship is simply that of unity...”

“For thousands of years the human race has been at war. It is enough...”

The next morning as many as possible journeyed to the temple site in Wilmette, north of Chicago. Mrs. Frey decided not to go because the weather was windy, cold and damp. Felicity and Elsbeth

bundled up and set forth. They rode street cars but had to walk the last several blocks; it was past the end of the line. But they weren't alone. The car was crowded to the end and all got off and walked and talked together.

A large tent had been erected as protection from the weather, but the wind coming directly off the lake was sharp. Though the program was to start at "noon" there was some delay. The stone to be used could not be found. Eventually it was located in some weeds and recognized. It did not look like a cornerstone – it was a broken stone that someone had brought from a construction site. Felicity overheard the woman who brought it describe how she had asked the builder for a stone and he let her pick one from a pile of rejects. Then she struggled, with the assistance of an elderly man, to convey it here. The streetcar operator did not want it on his car, but eventually let them rest it outside, on the bumper. At the end of the line they borrowed a child's wagon, but it soon broke. Someone else, later, had to bring the stone the rest of the way. She marveled that she had been able to get it here at all. She had no money to give.

As Felicity listened, she thought of the verse in the Gospel of Luke, "The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner." She was amazed at how fully the verse had become true.

Finally they were to begin. 'Abdu'l-Bahá addressed the crowd:

"The power which has gathered you here today notwithstanding the cold and windy weather is, indeed, mighty and wonderful. It is the power of God, the divine favor of Bahá'u'lláh which has drawn you together. We praise God that through His constraining love human souls are assembled and associated in this way.

"The Mashriqu'l-Adhkár in Ishqabad is almost completed. It is centrally located, nine avenues leading into it, nine gardens, nine fountains; all the arrangement and construction is according to the principle and proportion of the number nine. It is like a beautiful bouquet.

"Imagine a very lofty, imposing edifice surrounded completely by gardens of variegated flowers, with nine avenues leading through them, nine fountains and pools of water. Such is its matchless, beautiful design. Now they are building a hospital, a school for orphans, a home for cripples, a hospice and a large dispensary. God willing, when it is fully completed, it will be a paradise.

"I hope the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár in Chicago will be like this..."

Then, He proceeded to turn the first dirt. After that He called various people who represented different backgrounds to also turn some dirt so that as much of the human race as possible could be represented, at least in spirit.

After the ceremony people lingered and eventually drifted back to the streetcar line to return to Chicago. On their return the younger two informed Mrs. Frey of all they had experienced so vividly that she felt she had been there too.

"Photographs were taken," Elsbeth added. "And, I think I'm in one of them, with this new hat." She patted its wide brim.

Felicity and the Freys left Chicago the next day.

Back in Topeka, Felicity pondered what to do. She would never forget the moments she had had with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in His hotel suite that one evening. It was brief, and the room was crowded, but those moments were engraved on her heart. She had never felt so much love from anyone, not even her parents, husband or children, as she experience then. It was not a brief emotion, it was a solid thing—more “real” than the everyday world of cars and houses. It was as if a window to a deeper, truer reality had opened briefly. It had been too brief. *If this is Heaven, Felicity thought, then I’m ready.*

She now realized how important these teachings were to her and she wanted to share them. She was dismayed that she had so done nothing in support of her beliefs. Now she was energized and wanted to do something, but wasn’t sure what. She wanted to tell everyone in the city, but how?

Among other things, she had brought back a pamphlet about Bahá'u'lláh and Christ. The connections were amazing and implausible, but in her heart, she felt they were true. The experience of seeing so many other Bahá’ís, from so many different backgrounds and colors, confirmed for her that there was a power in this Message that could unite people. It was not just words. Here was concrete proof!

She remembered the newspaper article in the hotel. Everyone read newspapers; many people took both the morning and evening papers. Aside from gossip, the newspapers were the only source of news. Newspapers were the key.

One night she had a dream in which people were opening newspapers all across town. When Felicity woke up, she knew what she could do. It would take a little money, but she had some saved for a special occasion. *This* was a special occasion.

After breakfast, she went to the offices of both the *Capital* and the *Journal* and told the advertising clerks what she wanted to do. When they gasped in surprise, she knew it would get the attention of others too. It was the right thing to do.

Two days later, she opened the *Capital*, as she knew thousands of others in Topeka were doing, and saw the words she had planned. Some gasped in surprise, ‘How can anyone make such a claim?’ ‘Blasphemy,’ many others muttered. Not a few went so far as to think or exclaim, ‘Anti-Christ!’ More than one sermon for the next Sunday was hastily revised to warn innocent flocks to beware of this heresy. Such a claim was surely not less than that. The words were in a large display ad in the center of the top half of the page:

CHRIST HAS RISEN AND RETURNED
with the new name, as promised:
Baha-u-llah
The Glory of God
Revelations 3:12