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BEGINNINGS OF THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH IN WATAUGA COUNTY
NORTH CAROLINA

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Appalachian Culture
Appalachian State University

December 1988

BEGINNINGS OF THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH IN WATAUGA COUNTY, NORTH CAROLINA

The purpose of this paper is to review the beginnings of the Baha'i Faith in a mountain community in North Carolina. It is not the purpose of this paper to be a factual historical account. Rather, it is an overview of the efforts of Baha'is to establish a Baha'i community within a southern Appalachian county.

In the attempt to summarize religious practices in Appalachia, outside of the Baha'i community, I was struck by the number of Christian congregations in Watauga County and the wide diversity of belief. These two facts humble me in my attempt to include a section on religion in Appalachia as just a part of this brief paper. Hopefully, in the future, this part of the topic can be more fully explored, especially as regards the differences and similarities between the Baha'i Faith and other Appalachian religious beliefs and practices.

I learned that gathering information through oral

accounts is likely to result in conflicting dates, as well as other statistical data remembered. The research for this paper was to gather meaningful stories and a sense of the order of events rather than accurate statistics. The reader is advised to keep these thoughts in mind if comparing the reports contained here to other information about the first Baha'i activities in Watauga County.

Information was gathered regarding Baha'i activities in Watauga County in northwest North Carolina about activities from 1968 to 1974. Within this county is Appalachian State University in the town of Boone where the first recorded Baha'i meetings took place.

It seems appropriate to first give an overview of the existing religious practices in the Southern Appalachian mountains in the 1960's and 1970's. This is discussed in the first section of this paper. The second section gives a brief outline of the Baha'i Faith to acquaint the reader with at least a minimal understanding of its basic historical context and principles. The third section of this paper deals with the first adherents to the Baha'i Faith in Watauga County in the early 1970's. The fourth section of this paper describes the relationship of the Baha'i community with the rest of Watauga County and addresses the issue of reaction of residents to the Baha'i Faith. Some comparison is made between the Baha'i Faith and the other religions in Southern Appalachia. There is an

analysis of views held in common and those which meet with strong disapproval and disagreement. The fifth and final section of this paper offers suggestions on how Baha'is and members of other faiths could work together to accomplish shared goals and purposes.

Religion in Watauga County

The Boone/Blowing Rock phone book for 1988-89 lists thirty-two churches in Watauga County. This includes larger churches within the towns of Boone and Blowing Rock and smaller churches throughout the rest of the county. All together there are sixteen separate Christian denominations listed including twelve Baptist, three Presbyterian, two each Catholic, Episcopal, Lutheran, and Methodist, and one each of nine other Protestant or Interdenominational or Non-denominational sects. Of the Baptist congregations some distinguish themselves as Independent or Southern Baptists. The phone book list ignores the small churches that do not

have phones.

A directory of churches in the area listed in the Watauga Democrat weekly for a time in the middle 1980's increases the number of distinct denominations to twenty-two. More impressive is the increase in number of separate Baptist congregations to seventy. It is reasonable to assume that there are additional churches that appear on neither list but are visible if one travels the back roads and into the hollars scattered throughout the county. For a study done a few years back, Sue Keefe said she discovered there are one hundred, twenty-five churches in Watauga County (Keefe 1988).

Can we draw conclusions about similarities or differences among the religious beliefs and practices of the people in this Southern Appalachian county when we consider so many diversified groups?

FOXFIRE 7 deals with Appalachian mountain religion in a book of nearly 500 pages. Time does not allow for a fair summary in this paper of the material found in this volume. In the introduction, Paul Gillespie, editor, states that the interviews, recordings, and observations during the countless visits over a few years to gather the material for FOXFIRE 7 revealed the diverseness of belief among members within a single church. In addition, he and the other researchers found that there is not always agreement on

doctrine and ordinance in churches of the same denomination (Gillespie 1982: 12).

Bill Leonard, Assistant Professor of Church History at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky, states that while "mountain religion" brings to mind certain stereotypes, such as camp meetings, foot washings, snake handling, holy rollers, speaking in tongues, loud preaching, and tent revivals, it is important to look beyond these generalities to the meaning of the religion for those persons who practice it (Gillespie 1982: 15).

There are eight chapters in FOXFIRE 7 devoted to distinct major Christian sects found in Appalachia. Other chapters deal with specific practices, including the camp meeting, gospel music, baptism, foot washing, and snake handling. In addition to the collected stories and oral history accounts, typical of FOXFIRE volumes, there are over 100 photographs. In the appendix, Leonard summarizes the history of the denominations discussed in the book. This book is a recommended resource for anyone wanting to further explore the issues discussed in this paper.

Richard Humphrey (1984) summarizes the religious consciousness of the people of southern Appalachia by saying that for the most part their beliefs fall into one of three distinct forms: the Religion of Zion, the evangelical, and mainstream Christianity. Humphrey states that often

religious scholars have not made the distinction between the Religion of Zion and the evangelical, but have grouped these two together as traditional in comparison to mainstream.

According to Humphrey, beliefs in the Religion of Zion grew out of a tradition of small independent farmers who were closely connected to annual cycles of nature. The Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes teaches there is a season for everything and a time for every matter under heaven. Connection to the land becomes a sacred bond. The people identify the Southern Appalachian mountains with the Mount of Zion, a favored, beautiful, happy place referred to over and over again in the Old Testament. Zionists sometimes believe the promises foretold in Revelation refer to a new heaven and a new earth, the promise of eternity, to be built here in these hills (Humphrey 1984: 126). There are at least two Baptist churches in Watauga County with Zion as part of their names. There are at least four Baptist churches in the unincorporated town of Zionville in Watauga County.

Applying the teachings in Ecclesiastes means one should learn the basics of astrology. Planting should be done by these signs which are in the heavens, rather than by weather which reflects signs of the earth (Humphrey 1984: 129). A sense of humility and service to one's neighbors is evident.

There is the belief that God's creation earth is good and that evil exists because of human abuse (Humphrey 1984:

130).

In contrast, evangelical consciousness, which is much more prevalent in Watauga County, teaches that nature which is basically evil must be controlled. Human nature is sinful. If not saved through a conversion experience, persons are damned. There is emphasis on the differences between the things of this world and things that are spiritual. Troubles and hardships in this life will not last long. Jesus is in charge of life to come here on earth at his second coming when all that we know in the world will be destroyed. There is little reason to involve oneself in social causes on earth because none of these can cure the world's present evil condition. The individual looks ahead to a better time here when Jesus returns to establish his kingdom on earth, or to life with him in heaven if personal death comes before Christ's second coming. Evangelical Christianity crosses denominational lines and is evident in many protestant churches.

Larger churches in towns of Southern Appalachia, like Boone and Blowing Rock, reflect the beliefs and practices of mainstream Christianity in the rest of the country. Their congregations are often made up of professionals and educators who moved to the area from elsewhere in the United States. There are doctrinal divisions and separations but there is an overlapping and cooperation with one another

especially when it comes to social improvement concerns. There is a shared optimistic belief with mainstream Americans that technological progress is good. Appalachians, including their old timey religious fundamentalist beliefs, are perceived as backward. It is believed that when they are educated they will come up to par with the rest of the country. Personal observation leads me to believe that there is increased understanding among many leaders in the larger mainstream churches in Watauga County in the late 1980's that real and perceived social and economic problems are not so simple as to identify Appalachians by the Culture of Poverty model popularized by Jack Weller in Yesterday's People, as well as by other writers in the 1960's.

As with any study, because life is not stagnant, peoples' beliefs evolve. Contact with others brings a newness to personal awareness. With so many of the congregations one inevitably finds differences of opinion in the membership regarding how much emphasis should be placed on personal salvation or on community and global concerns.

The Baha'i Faith is an independent world religion. It is not a denomination of Christianity. It is not a sect of Islam. Its adherents claim its founder, Baha'u'llah, and his message fulfill the prophecies of both the Moslem and Christian teachings, as well as those of earlier religions.

Baha'u'llah was born to a wealthy ruling family in Persia in the early part of the nineteenth century. However, his interests lay in religious matters rather than those of politics. He became an active follower of a young spiritual teacher who in 1844 had declared that he was the founder of new faith and that he was the bearer of a new revelation from God.

This young teacher, who took on the name of the Bab (which means "the gate") expounded his teachings in a "mental world that had changed little from medieval times, except to become more obscurantist, isolated, and fatalistic" (Hatcher and Martin 1984: 24,25). The Bab talked about a new society. He elaborated a system of social laws designed to ensure peace and public order as well as ideas for a new direction of economic activity and laws for marriage, divorce and inheritance. He revealed prayers, meditations, moral precepts and prophetic guidance for individual followers. He called for a complete

spiritual and social transformation of Persia (Hatcher and Martin 1984).

This theme of complete reformation runs through every chapter of the Bab's holy book, the Bayan. Along with this message, he claimed that his mission primarily was to awaken the people for the coming of the universal Manifestation of God whom all the world's religions were awaiting.

The Bab's social and spiritual teachings were revolutionary. In a short ministry of six years he had thousands of devoted followers. This group included many distinguished theologians. Most likely, this is because of the Bab's ability to understand and interpret complicated scriptures although he had very little formal education. The fact of the success of his mission evoked the anger of both the clergy and political leaders. Thousands of his followers were murdered and the Bab himself was put to death in a historically documented drama filled chain of events in 1850.

Miraculously, Baha'u'llah was not killed in the persecutions before and after the Bab's death. He established himself as leader of the small band of followers that remained. Years later, Baha'u'llah made the claim to a few close followers in Baghdad, Persia, in 1863 that he was the universal messenger from God, "He Whom God Will Make Manifest," promised by the Bab. A separate new independent

religion was born, and soon the followers called themselves "Baha'is", followers of Baha'u'llah.

From a religious historic standpoint, one of the most remarkable tasks accomplished by Baha'u'llah was a series of letters addressed collectively to the "Kings of the earth" and to individual national heads of state. The letters contained prophetic warnings to the leaders of the mid-nineteenth century on the condition of the planet. They also told of a new world civilization that would be created as part of the evolving plan of God. This new civilization would recognize the oneness of all people on the earth. The letters asserted that God had put into motion this evolutionary historic plan which no power on earth could resist. Baha'u'llah urged the rulers to recognize these new teachings regarding the unification of all mankind and assist in building the new world order. He warned that if the leaders resisted these developments they would bring disaster to themselves, to their individual countries and to the world (Hatcher and Martin 1984: 40).

Baha'u'llah addressed rulers of both the East and the West. He encouraged the formation of a world federal system uniting all nations to address collectively the needs of the planet. He said the process of working in families then tribes then nations had evolved beyond nationalism, and it was time to look at the whole earth as one country. "It is not for him to pride himself who loveth his country, but

rather for him who loveth the whole world. The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens" (Baha'u'llah 1952: 29).

There is little known about the response of any of the national heads of state to these letters from Baha'u'llah. One of the few recorded exceptions was from Queen Victoria of Great Britain who said, "If this is of God it will endure; if not, it can do no harm" (Effendi 1941: 66)

Until his death in 1892, Baha'u'llah's ministry was spent in guiding his followers and revealing a vast collection of writings, including tablets, prayers, and laws, regarding the spiritual nature of humankind and its future. Before his passing he made it clear that the leadership of the Baha'i Faith would be passed on to his eldest son, 'Abdu'l-Baha who had been directing the practical administrative affairs during the latter years of Baha'u'llah's life.

The literal meaning of 'Abdu'l-Baha's name is "Servant of Baha". Many Baha'is, especially those in the West regarded 'Abdu'l-Baha as the Messiah, the Return of Christ. He made a point of stating that he was his father's servant and that he was not to be thought of in any special station higher than that. Among the titles bestowed on him by Baha'u'llah are the following: "Master....the Limb of the Law of God," His "most great favor" unto men, His "most

perfect bounty" to them, "the Most Mighty Branch of God.....a shield unto all who are in heaven and on earth.....a shelter for all mankind," as well as the one of his sons "from Whose tongue God will cause the signs of His power to stream forth" (Effendi 1944: 242,243).

'Abdu'l-Baha's ministry lasted twenty-nine years. He expanded the teachings of his father. He wrote hundreds of tablets and stories and revealed additional prayers. He traveled to Europe and North America. He spent nearly eight months in 1912 touring the United States, making speeches often twice in the same day in two different towns, maintaining a schedule that would be difficult with modern transportation on a person half his age. Before his death in 1921, 'Abdu'l-Baha appointed his grandson, Shoghi Effendi, to lead the Baha'i community in the position of Guardian.

The Guardian's responsibilities included interpretation of the Baha'i teachings and expanding the administration of the Faith in local and national communities. His leadership until his death in 1957 focused on the development of the International Center in Haifa, Israel, and the establishment of Local and National Spiritual Assemblies around the world. Today there are Baha'is living in over 112,000 localities world-wide. There are more than 36,000 established Baha'i communities and 148 National Spiritual Assemblies (Schaefer 1988: 20). The Baha'i writings have been translated into

more than 660 languages (Hatcher and Martin 1984: 62).

Administratively, the Baha'i Faith begins in the local community. When there are nine or more adult believers within a community a Local Spiritual Assembly is elected to guide the affairs of that community. After there are a number of local assemblies then a National Spiritual Assembly of nine members is elected. There are no nominations or campaigns for elected positions. All adult Baha'is living within a jurisdictional area are eligible to vote and be elected. In 1963, with National Spiritual Assemblies in fifty-six countries, the first Universal House of Justice was elected. Terms of office for local and national assemblies are one year, and for the Universal House of Justice, five years.

Basic Teachings of the Baha'i Faith

The principles of the Baha'i Faith revolve around the fundamental theme of unity: the oneness of God, the oneness of humankind, and the oneness of religion.

Baha'is believe that all concepts about a supernatural and creative being are focused on the same all-knowing Supreme Being whether that Being is called Yahweh or God or Allah or some other name. Baha'is believe the nature of God is so beyond that of man as to make it impossible for man to

comprehend the reality of God. He is referred to as "Unknowable Essence" and by superlative attributes like most loving, most merciful..."exalted above all limitations, transcending the comprehension of all created things" (Baha'u'llah 1952: 261).

The principle of the oneness of humankind means that all people have the same God-given rights and capacities. It means being equal but not all the same. Baha'is believe in "unity in diversity". Putting this principle into action means to reorganize the complete social and economic structure of human society.

The principle of the oneness of religion means that the founders of all the great world's religions have received direction from the one God. They differ in the social teachings appropriate to their time and place in history. Religion is progressive. It is an evolving process throughout conscious human history. Baha'is believe that each Revelation from God that became the foundation of the world's religions contained two aspects: one set of teachings regarding the health and wellbeing of the individual and his or her personal relationship with God and the other dealing with laws and ordinances appropriate for the society in which they were given. Historically, the Baha'i Writings tell us we need collective spiritual guidelines for the most important current need which is to end wars and establish orderly lasting world peace.

Additional basic principles of the Baha'i Faith address concerns which are connected to the recognition of world unity. They include the independent investigation of the truth, the equality of men and women, the elimination of prejudice of all kinds, the essential harmony of science and religion, spiritual solutions to economic problems thereby eliminating the two extremes of wealth and poverty, an international auxiliary language, universal education, and a lasting peace upheld by a world government.

First Adherents to Baha'i Faith in Watauga County

One of teachings of the Baha'i Faith concerns the importance of pioneering, which is to move to a place where few or no Baha'is reside. Baha'is are encouraged to plan their personal lives around pioneering if at all possible. One can pioneer to another country or to another location within his or her own nation.

One of the first Baha'is to spend much time in Watauga County, as far as available information provides is a man whom I will call Bill. He was a teacher in Florida and took additional college courses at different campuses in the

spirit of short term pioneering to those communities. In 1968, he came to Appalachian State University. One of Bill's first activities on campus was to check at the library to see if there were any Baha'i books available. In addition to three commonly used books about the Faith in this country, donated some ten years or so earlier by a student, there were several books that Bill recognized as being those by covenant breakers. A covenant breaker in the Baha'i Faith is an individual who after formally joining the Faith maliciously attempts to usurp its unifying principles. At first Bill was just uneasy with this discovery, but was unsure of the appropriate action.

That first summer enrolled in courses at ASU, Bill hung notices on the bulletin board in the student union announcing a get together to talk about the Baha'i Faith. There were two students who came by and sat and talked for a short time. They took the literature Bill had brought with him. These students never contacted Bill again, but he thought this was a positive meeting, a sort of beginning.

Bill's friend, David, also a member of the Baha'i Faith, had remained in Florida, caring for Bill's invalid grandfather which allowed for Bill to come to ASU. David was especially interested in the fact that Bill had located covenant breaking books at the library.

The following year, David and Bill both enrolled in

summer courses at ASU. They made plans to hold a public meeting at the university. They put an ad in the college newspaper and hung fliers. About eleven students came for the program, a slide presentation, "Truth is One." About four of these students attended a follow up meeting.

In the summer of 1969, Bill and David returned to the ASU library to deal with the covenant breaking books. They remember that there were about eight of them, more than they had observed in any similar research done in Colorado or Florida. David said that one book he remembers specifically was authored by the so-called "second guardian of the Baha'i Faith." It had never been checked out. David said, "Naturally, who would want to read a book by the second guardian of the Baha'i Faith?" He decided he would check it out and "accidentally" lose it. Then something happened causing him really not to know where it was. He apologised to the librarian and asked what he should do. He was told that because the book had been a donation to start with just to forget it. David and Bill chose instead to replace it with the donation of an acceptable Baha'i book.

There are now guidelines from the National Spiritual Assembly regarding the discovery of covenant breaking books in a public or college library. The official attitude is to surround these books with up to date accurate and attractive volumes, so that readers automatically pick those books considered more worthwhile by the Baha'i administration.

One additional possibility, often welcomed by librarians, is to offer to replace older books of questionable accuracy with updated volumes. Actually, this is how the other seven or so questionable books were handled at ASU library.

Bill says that the problem deals with authenticity. Much of the information in covenant breaking books is simply inaccurate. People should be granted the opportunity to read differing opinions, but not be confused with misinformation.

After returning to Florida in the fall of 1969, David became dissatisfied with the idea of remaining in Florida. He remembered an ad he had seen in a North Carolina newspaper for teacher openings in a town about 45 minutes drive from Boone. He checked it out and found there was still one opening. He felt it was exactly what he wanted. He moved to that town and began holding Baha'i public meetings there.

David remembers holding one public meeting at ASU in December 1969 and making arrangements to rent a film, "His Name Shall Be One," to be shown in January both in the town where he lived and in Boone. He received help for publicizing and conducting the meeting in January when the film was shown from a couple young people who were attending

Baha'i meetings near where he was teaching public school. Articles and advertisements in the APPALACHIAN document the January meeting and another one held later that winter with the film, "The New Wind." David remembers the campus paper as being very open and helpful, running ads weekly for a very reasonable rate.

Bill's grandfather died in the spring of 1970. He took that summer off from the work to complete his Masters degree. However, in the fall of 1970, he moved to North Carolina, lived off campus out of Watauga County, and enrolled as a fulltime graduate student. It was during that year and the next that activities with the college Baha'i club got under way. APPALACHIAN articles and advertisements, as well as photographs in the college annual, RHODENDENDRON, reflect some of the activities of the club.

During 1971, a young man, whom I will call Rob, became a part time student at ASU within a matter of weeks of becoming a Baha'i. Rob had been in the army stationed in Charlotte, North Carolina, where he learned about the Baha'i Faith through some friends, and he decided to become a Baha'i himself. After moving to Boone he continued to study the Faith with two other Baha'is from Charlotte, one of whom was also attending ASU. Rob remembers that there were regular meetings at the student union all summer. One of his activities included putting up pamphlets about the Faith

on bulletin boards on each dormitory floor. Years later he met an alumnus of ASU who had overlapped the time Rob was there. Rob asked this person, who also later became a Baha'i, "How did you first hear about the Baha'i Faith?" This individual responded, "When I was a student at ASU I used to see fliers on the dorm bulletin board."

Judy was born in Watauga County. She moved to Erie, Pennsylvania, with her family when she was about three years old. They left Appalachia, because her father got a job in Ohio. There was work, but no housing. They lived with an aunt and uncle and their six children. They stayed just six months, then moved back to Watauga County, only to move back again for another six month period. Finally, they moved to Cleveland to stay. For about five years, however, they maintained their farm here in Watauga County. They came back often for visits, always for Christmas, and Judy's parents often talked of moving back home.

When she was twenty-one, Judy moved back to Watauga County. Her mother had passed away the year before. She had gradually taken over the role of housekeeper during her mother's illness. She went to cosmetology school weekends and summers and worked as a waitress and at a beauty salon. Judy's brother, who is a couple years older than she, was in Viet Nam during most of the time of their mother was sick and needed so much care. Judy gave the excuse of wanting to attend college part time in Boone, but she really wanted to

get out of the heavy responsibilities connected with her father's house. She expected his feelings would be hurt less if she left the area completely rather than if she chose to move from his home and stay closeby.

After moving to Watauga County Judy got a job in a hair salon and attended classes at ASU as a part-time student. Rob came to get his hair cut. Judy remembers that he wanted it stylish, which was rather long at the time, but he did not want it to be offensive to anyone because he was teaching classes at the university. He explained they were religious classes about the Baha'i Faith. Judy remembers being impressed that a young person would be so committed and knowledgable about his religion. Rob invited Judy to attend the classes. She began to attend regularly. She remembers that David would always have films or slide strip programs ready for the students. Judy says that the meetings were exciting because of the interest of so many students. There were often twenty people in attendance. She became a member of the newly formed Baha'i club and sometime later became a Baha'i herself.

Within a couple years of her moving back to Watauga County, Judy's father also moved back. After marrying a woman from here, they moved again to Ohio, stayed about a year and then returned to Watauga County again. By a year or so after that, Judy's brother also moved back. He also married a person from here and moved to Ohio for a short

time before coming again back to the North Carolina mountains. Now all of Judy's immediate family, as well as most aunts and uncles live within about a fourteen mile radius. Of her father's eight brothers and sisters, and her mother's four, only one aunt and uncle live outside this area.

Involvement with Watauga County outside of ASU

Simultaneously, while there was apparently some acceptance of the Baha'i Faith on the Appalachian State University campus, this was not the case in the surrounding area in the late 1960's and early 1970's. Bill went to one of the area's businesses and mentioned that he would be holding meetings on campus that would be open to the public. He sensed strong objection. He was told that he should stay on campus, that he would be here only a few number of years while attending school. The businessman said, "Then

you'll be gone. I have to stay here."

David reports a similar cold shoulder treatment from a local newspaper, closeby, but not in Watauga County. When he wished to put in ads and pay for them, he was told that the only religious quotes that the paper would print had to be from the Bible.

From the interviews I conducted, I learned that Appalachians who become Baha'is are made to feel responsible for breaking family unity. There seems to be an effort on the part of their families to make them feel guilty for breaking away from traditional values. This is true even if their families were not formally connected to a specific church.

Ruth's parents raised her to feel incomplete without Sunday School and weekly preaching, even though they did not attend church themselves. She attended a Southern Baptist Church, which she says was all "fire and brimstone." Every week she was sent with neighbors. On a typical Sunday there would be devotions, then a few songs, followed by readings from the Bible and then one hour of Sunday School and one to one and a half hours of "sermon-preachin". Ruth quit going to church when she was about eighteen. She was married at nineteen by a minister-friend, but not in church.

When one Appalachian family member becomes a Baha'i,

the topic usually becomes a cause of controversy or the issue is simply avoided. Ruth has been a Baha'i for over a year and a half. She asked her husband's opinion about her decision ahead of time. He encouraged her to do what she wanted about it. She has told her sister, but she has not told her mother. One time she mentioned to her mother that she has a friend who is a Baha'i. Her mother asked, "What's that?" Ruth tried to explain a little about the Faith and said it originated in Iran. Her mother quickly responded, "Oh, one of the rag heads."

Judy tells numerous stories of family disapproval. For example, her father asked one time a couple years ago, "Have you been to church recently?" She answered that yes, she had been. He said, "But your way is not our way." Judy feels frustrated that members of her family complain but refuse to listen to information about the Baha'i Faith or to do any independent reading. The local church to which her father and step mother belong came up with the conclusion that the Baha'i Faith is a cult. Judy's brother expressed concern about this to her, but he would not read material disproving these statements. One time when Judy was helping her dad with improvements at his home a young minister stopped to visit with them. It seemed natural at one point for Judy to mention that she is a member of the Baha'i Faith. Her father was embarrassed and apologised to the minister saying, "It's our fault because we didn't take her to church much when she was a young'un." Judy responded

that it was because she had been raised to investigate and think for herself that she felt secure enough to check into the Baha'i Faith.

Often when persons go to a new place to offer new ideas or new technology, they go with the idea also of changing the culture. Sadly, this is true historically in Appalachia. Countless documents recall how educators and religious missionaries wished to help the perceived backward mountaineer to become a part of modern America. Humphrey (1980: 139) shares the wish of an Appalachian written in 1978 for someone to "one day come into this hollow and show some signs of approval of the way he has lived over the decades, and the way he wants to live forever. And not try to change him without first knowin him."

This wish is stated in Baha'i guidelines: The pioneer or a travelling teacher does not go out to another country to make people over in his own image and teach them his personal opinions and the customs of his nation, he goes out to tell them Baha'u'llah has come and that they too are welcome to drink from the life-giving waters of His Revelation and be recreated by them as we hope we ourselves have been....No one knows how much or how little of any one race's nation's or tribal group's customs and outlook may eventually become part of that new World Order. So how can any pioneer - be he American, Persian or from some other

place - tell the people he is teaching "Be like me!" Who says his way of life is the pattern or even better than the ways of the people he is teaching? (Rabbani 1974: 86).

Whether Baha'is go to another country or just to another area or town it seems very appropriate for them to learn all that is possible about the culture of new place. Their basic principles tell of the value of unity in diversity. What a wonderfully appropriate way to teach this principle, by living and showing an interest in and appreciation for the differences! The Guardian of the Baha'i Faith, Shoghi Effendi, advised its followers: One thing and only one thing will unfailingly and alone secure the undoubted triumph of this sacred Cause, namely, the extent to which our own inner life and private character mirror forth in their manifold aspects the splendour of those eternal principles proclaimed by Baha'u'llah (Effendi 1953: 194).

Notes

Acknowledgements: This paper was made possible because of the accounts shared by the following people: Ron Greene, Janie Dougherty, Glen Mommsen, Derald Hendry, Bob Pickering,

Ruby Hicks and Sean Johnson. Many of these folks shared personal collections of fliers, newspaper clippings and photographs, as well as their stories. Sincere thanks to all these friends! The writer is grateful for their willingness, in fact eagerness, to help and for their cooperation and patience with this project. Within the text of the paper names have been changed of both Baha'is and others so as not to cause embarrassment to anyone and to protect each person's right to privacy in sharing personal details and experiences. There were more stories shared than could be included in this paper. For these, too, the writer is thankful and hopeful that they can be used at some future time.

Baha'u'llah lived from 1817 to 1892. Many of His Writings were translated from their original form in Persian or Arabic to English by his grandson, Shoghi Effendi who died in 1957.

This project became much larger than originally planned. Maybe it is due to my personal interest in the topic, but each section of information led to more questions and a wish to explore something more. I had a difficult time putting a stop on additional reading and interviewing in order to complete a paper by the semester's end.

Perhaps personally most relevant, at least in the near future, is my reaction to greater awareness of the importance of the Baha'i Club at Appalachian State University in the establishment of the Baha'i community in Watauga County. Because of my commitment as a member of the Baha'i Faith to spread information about the Faith, this awareness led to a personal goal of reactivating the college club next semester.

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*Interview for background material
for college undergraduate paper
Submitted by Mike Parker 12/88 ASU*

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*"Beginning of Bahai Faith in
Watauga County, NC"*

Bob Pickering and Derald Hendry
Interview, Morganton, NC 11/3/88

Bob:

In the summer of 1967 I attended summer school at Appalachian State University and took three courses. This was my first experience on the campus. It was recommended to me by a man who graduated from Catawba, an Appalachian citizen, a counselor with whom I worked. He recommended I come to Boone.

Of course, being a homefront pioneer, wherever we go, we immediately begin to think what can we do for the Faith. Of course, with my being up there alone and starting my schooling, I did it as a second best thing. I was in administration for high school principals. I began my first three courses.

The important thing is that I did research the library. I put on the bulletin board in the student union announcements of a meeting. It was going to be a visit session, you might say, about the Baha'i Faith. I had two students come by who sat and chatted. They took the literature I had brought. Derald had stayed in Florida caring for my invalid grandfather which allowed me to go to school. He was interested in the fact that I had found covenant breaking books in the ASU library. I recognized them by the tone of the books, the dates, and the author's

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name, as covenant breaking materials. I didn't read them, but just parused them, took a quick look. I made a list of all the books that were there.

One of the things we do as homefront pioneers in a new community is to donate books to the libraries. Knowing that I'd be coming back for four or five summers, I felt like this would be ground work.

I thought the first meeting was effective even though students did not contact me again. They were students from out of the state, too.

In the library, there were at least three other books, Baha'i World Faith, Baha'u'llah and the New Era, and The Dawnbreakers. There was the name (forgotten) of a lady on the inside covers who had also gone to ASU, and I believe the date was 1955.

In the second year, 1968, I brought a program to use. I did not bring equipment, knowing there would be some available. I brought Truth is One, like we've always used to show at the meeting. Derald was planning to come up from Florida for a couple of weeks during my summer session. We planned at that time to work together to get more books into the library, to get the others (covenant breaker books) out, and to hold some sort of public meeting.

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DERALD: We asked the librarian if we could exchange some of the older books which we considered questionable in accuracy. She said yes, they would welcome that help, and that if we had newer ones to replace those, that would be fine.

BOB: We had quite a job, because there were about eight (books by covenant breakers). It had upset me so much the first summer that I didn't think I'd be able to finish my work. We hadn't seen that many any where, although we had been to many places in Colorado and to Florida.

DERALD: Actually, in looking at these books which were written by the "second Guardian of the Baha'i Faith" and other such named authors, no one had checked these out. Who's going to read a book by the second guardian of the Baha'i Faith? So I decided to check the book out and accidentally lose it. And then something happened, and I really couldn't find it. I apologised to the librarian and said it must have gotten lost and asked what I should do. She said since it had been a donation to start with there was no problem, and we didn't have to replace it. We did anyway.

Question: How are non-Baha'is in reading this going to react to this idea that Baha'is pull and lose books they don't want read? What about freedom of the press? How is this different from other censorships to which we would

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really reject?

BOB: The question comes down to authenticity. Some of these books were poorly put together. They appeared inferior to anything else you could read. The big concern is what is in the books. It is not like censorship. Information was totally inaccurate. People should have a chance to read anything, but not inaccurate information.

After talking with the librarian and finding out she would be happy to replace old books with newer ones, we chose to work it out that way, which is much more appropriate.

DERALD: The official attitude from the National Baha'i Center is what I agree with. Since this incident in the 1960's, I would probably not do it that way again. The official attitude is to surround those books with up to date books, worthwhile, so that readers would automatically pick the newer up to date books. Others could remain there, but no one would likely read them anyway. Our guidelines now are not to pull them and perhaps lose them, but just to leave them and ignore them. The additional idea is also very appropriate, to offer to exchange older books, if they are found to be objectionable, for newer ones. Of course, if they are authentic, then old Baha'i books are great for research.

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BOB: In the summer of 1968, we did plan the one meeting. We put an ad in the school newspaper. We put up fliers. We had about eleven students attend this meeting. We showed Truth is One, a slide show presentation. There were a lot of questions. Derald was there, and we sat around and just chatted. We even had a meeting afterwards. About four people showed up to talk about the Faith. These were all on campus students. Early interested students were a combination of students from North Carolina and from other states.

I chose to get degrees from different campuses in different sections of the country. Moving and taking this work at Appalachia was quite a personal test, because they didn't speak (same) English there. I had to relearn English. In fact for the first time in my life, I picked up a southern accent because I listened to the Appalachian accent so much, that now I have a little bit of it in me. Now when I travel, people will say, "Oh, you're from the south," whereas before I had no detectable accent. The truth of the matter is that those summer experiences, listening so intently to what students were saying in class, and at these meetings visiting with people, I got to where I sorta talk like thum.

Question: Did you talk southern or did you talk mountain?

BOB: I rally got the go-od mountin talkin. I waz gittin so

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I waz doin it so much, I got back to Floorda, and they awl assed where I'd a bin! I sed, I'd bin up in the mountins. Then I'd start trying to relearn my old way of speaking, but I know iss become pard-a my vocabalary.

One thing that shocked me the most was the lack of sanitary cleanliness that existed in the dormitory.

Comment from interviewer: I've been in college rooms in many parts of the country where my children have gone to school. I'm always shocked at the degree of uncleanliness in boys' living quarters.

BOB: Well, I'd been also on campusses all over the country. But when I got into this place, I could not believe what I saw. I went down town and buy disinfectant and a broom, and I went to work on that room. I had to clean up my section of it just to be able to stay there. It was one of the older buildings. The spring session had just ended. The mess left included human body waste in the corners. And I thought, what have I come to? You talk about Appalachian spirit...I don't know because I only stayed in that dormitory one summer.

This guy (roommate?) was married and would go home each weekend to where he was an assistant principal. So carless in his body habits, he had green sheets on his bed that became blacker and blacker. It was hard to believe he was

a principal. So I just took care of my side of the room. After that I decided I would pay for a single room. I barely made it through that session.

That was 1968. I went ahead and took the summer session in 1969. My grandfather died that year. I took the next summer off to get over the experience of that, having taken care of him while he was sick for four years.

DERALD: In the summer of 1969 we were both taking courses at Appalachian State University. While we were up there I was making the decision of whether I wanted to go back to teaching in Florida or do something else. Moving to North Carolina was the farthest thought from my mind.

While up in the mountains I read a newspaper that said they needed some teachers in Morganton, North Carolina. I kept that in the back of my mind and went on back to Florida. In that fall, after returning to Florida, I decided I had had it down there. I remembered the article. I called Morganton. They had one opening in exactly what I wanted. So I came up in the fall of '69. The first public meeting we had was in December of that year. I got the film, "His Name Shall Be One", and showed it both in Morganton and in Boone. We showed that in January of 1970, on World Religion Day, I think. (See articles from Appalachian to get dates) At that time, it was an expensive film to rent, \$25.00, I think. That is why we used it both

places once we had it. That seemed like a lot of money then. That meeting at Appalachian State University was successful.

At the first meeting, Mike Lewis from Morganton had not yet signed his card, but he went and participated in Boone. By the second meeting when "The New Wind" was shown in February, he had already signed his Baha'i card. He went up ahead to hang posters and so forth. At that time he was a senior in high school.

We decided to follow through on the ideas that had been presented in the two public meetings. There had been a number of people who had come to both meetings. The campus newspaper was very open. We were able to run ads at a very reasonable rate. We ran them for about two or three months after those meetings. Then I got so involved in a lot of local Baha'i activities in Morganton, with Mike's being a new Baha'i, and a lot of deepening and teaching activities here, we did not do a lot in Boone.

Neither Bob nor I went to ASU the summer of 1970. Bob went back as a full time student fall 1970 at ASU for that academic year. He took time off from work to complete his masters degree.

That's when the college club got started and a lot of activity there.

BOB: Because Derald needed the support for youth activities here in Morganton I rented a room from him, lived here and drove back and forth to Boone. My classes were arranged on just three days a week, but even so, it was difficult going back and forth in the winter months. I had started with classes on five days, but when I realized how difficult it was, I changed the next quarter to Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday classes.

During the time I was there in Boone, I'd make sure everything was arranged for different meetings, and to get the club itself established on the college campus. For that year, I was the only Baha'i student. We did have a number of other Baha'is who supported activities. We did have contacts (non-Baha'is) at that time who were very interested. They came regularly, but never became Baha'is, at least in the time we kept in touch.

Question: Do you remember who the first Baha'is were? How about Ron Greene?

Ron Greene participated with us in 1970-1971. (see interview of Ron Greene: conflict of early dates)

Interview of Janie Winebarger Dougherty at the Mountain House

Boone, NC 10/23/1988 edited 1/25/2019

I'll start with the initial introduction. Ron Greene and I were both older part time students at Appalachian. I don't know how he happened to choose me to cut his hair. He told me he wanted to wear his hair in a stylish way, which was long at the time, but he didn't want to turn anyone off because he was teaching his religion to people of different backgrounds. He called these classes, "firesides."

He invited me to one. It seemed like they were once a week, but they stopped right then, maybe school break. Maybe he was completing a series. I was invited to a meeting being held on campus. I expected to go and find other people, but it turned out I was the only person there. He taught me out of the *Kitab-i-Igan*, which was *beyond my understanding*.

Prior to this, the only information I had about the Baha'i Faith was a few pamphlets and a couple of conversations. I didn't understand a thing he was explaining! I felt his calmness and his sincerity and his self-assured manner. He told me the whole story of how he had previously had difficulty, and how the Faith had just uplifted his whole life. He would come into the hair salon regularly, and I would ask him about it, because I knew he was really involved in it. What impressed me, I remember, is that anyone would know so much about his own religion.

My background was that my mother was Baptist, and my father was Methodist having lived in N.C.. We moved to Ohio for my father to find work. He had agricultural grants from having been in the Navy, had worked here on our farm (near Boone) of about fifty acres. We moved to Ohio twice. I was preschool age the first time. I didn't go to school for a while, because we moved back here. There was work up there, but no housing. We ended up living with my uncle who had four children. That was in Erie, Pennsylvania, and my father worked in Ohio. We had very minimum housing. We got an apartment in downtown Cleveland. The first couple times we went up there, each was for about six months. Then we moved up there to stay, but we would come back down to North Carolina often, always at Christmas and always longer in the summer. All our church activities were here, because this was still home, and this was what we knew.

We kept our farm here until my Dad decided he had to stay in Ohio to earn a good living. My parents' dream always was that we would eventually move back. By the time we were able to purchase a home in Ohio, I was about eight years old. We sold the farm here. My father was a very conservative man. We purchased our home, and I think he was making about \$75.00 each week. Our rent had been about \$75.00 each

month, and we were able to purchase a home for very little more than that payment per month. He learned he could mortgage the first house for a down payment on a second one which he rented out. He learned to keep property as his investment.

He was happy to learn to keep up and improve the homes. He was meticulous and learned to do all the maintenance and repair on both places.

I didn't know that we were not poor until I was a teenager. I always felt like I was poor because I didn't have what other people had, mainly clothes. (Q: When did your viewpoint change?) My father explained to me that he would purchase just one household appliance at a time, like a washer or a refrigerator. Even with a car, he would wait until he had at least half the cost of it, and use that as a down payment. He wasn't going to pay all that interest to the bank! At that time, people weren't quite as big on credit as they are now.

One time we had a vacuum cleaner salesman come to the house. He demonstrated this fantastic vacuum cleaner. It was a very large sum of money at that time, maybe \$200. He was telling the guy that he had a car that he was going to be replacing, and he couldn't also buy that expensive vacuum. I realized a lot of other kids' parents couldn't buy a new car, and if they did, they were making payments. Then I decided we were not poor. My dad was very frugal with all of us, with allowances. I got less than the other kids in my neighborhood. I never had the kind of clothes that other children had. We shopped at discount stores.

I moved back to North Carolina when I was twenty-one. My mother had passed away the year before. I had slowly and gradually taken over the role at home of housekeeper, and I was working a lot. I have one brother who's older. He had been in Viet Nam while my mother was ill. He returned and worked a lot himself, but I don't remember him being there a lot before I moved back to North Carolina.

I probably would have been as happy living up there (in Ohio), but I was working all the time and too hard. I knew it would hurt my father if I moved from his home and stayed in that area. It was easier to move a distance away. My excuse in moving to Boone was to go to college.

I started working at sixteen and started cosmetology school while I was still in high school. I got my driver's license at seventeen. I was a waitress. I went to cosmetology school weekends and summers. I also worked at a salon where the owner made wigs. At that time wearing wigs were very popular. I was working several jobs.

I had met a fella I was dating here on a quick summer visit, so that was another reason to come to Boone. I came here with the intention of getting to know him better.

I learned the Dean of Women at ASU was a second cousin of mine, Dr Maxie Edmisten. Everyone loved her and called her Dean Eddie. She encouraged me to enroll as a special student. I hoped I might work my way through college.

Ron was in the hair salon for an apt. He informed me that I could be a member of the Baha'i club simply because I went to school at ASU (Appalachian State University).

That was the first year that the Baha'i Club had been functioning. I remember we organized a group photo for the club. The only requirement was just that there be two students in the club.

Derald Hendry started coming up from Morganton, NC. He would bring slide programs with tapes that he had created himself and always had a program set up for us. He saw it as a great avenue to enlighten people in an intellectual setting. There were sometimes big crowds, as many as twenty people in the Student Union, room 118, I think. It was really exciting.

All my extended family, except one aunt and uncle who still lived in Lyndhurst, Ohio, were back here in Boone. And that aunt and uncle would visit often. My father came from a family of nine children, and my mother was one of five children. They were both from here. After my mother died, my father ended up marrying my mother's second cousin, who was also from here.

I moved back first. My father moved back within a couple years. After he married his second wife, they moved back to Ohio for about a year. He had a mild stroke and some other health problems, so he took early retirement from Caterpillar and moved back to North Carolina, which left my brother working in Ohio. Within about a year, he, too, moved here. Then he met someone from here, and they moved back to Ohio just for a short time, and then back here to settle. Now everyone in the family is within about a fourteen-mile radius here in Watauga County, in or near Boone.

My religious training from childhood was very little, Bible School in the summers. I wasn't here enough to learn much. In Ohio I went to church, a Lutheran Church, with a neighbor when I was about seven years old and got into the choir. It was a fun thing to do, and my parents had no objection. They were probably thankful that the neighbor took me and they didn't have to go. They were uncomfortable with "northern ways." They felt rather inadequate, like some southern country people. As I grew older, I went to church with different friends who were from all different backgrounds. In Ohio, I lived in an ethnic and racially integrated community of country, whites, Italians, and Black kids. Our school was predominantly Black, but not as much as some surrounding schools. I went to a Catholic Church quite frequently. There were regular weddings and other festivities, and we attended these where I learned different traditions.

We lived in very tiny little apartments in East Cleveland for a number of years. There was another man from Watauga county who worked daily with my father.

I think most people figure since I don't have a southern accent, and don't have family close here in town, that I'm not from here. That's part of my difficulty with the whole issue of teaching (about the Baha'i Faith) here because of repercussions. I am related and I am in public service since I have a business here (hair salon).

Q: What is your family's reaction to the fact that you are a Baha'i? They are embarrassed by it, actually, because I'm not doing the "traditional" thing. They don't see the things I see. My father made a comment to me one time about church. He said, "How long has it been since you've been to church?"

And I said, "I have been."

And he said, "Well, your way is not our way."

I was in shock. I said, "If you knew anything about my way and then wanted to criticize it, I'd be glad to discuss it with you, but since you don't know anything about it, and apparently don't care to, I don't want to hear the criticism."

My father had no strong religious affiliation until he married my step mother. She has eleven brothers and sisters. Three of her brothers are fundamentalist Baptist ministers. They are very much integrated into that way of thinking. The one approach I had made with her, trying to explain Baha'i, I used the term "in addition to the Bible," and she got very upset, said that nothing was to be "in addition to the Bible!" She said the books are sealed. I'm not sure that she used that term, but I know that term is in the Bible. I was just not prepared and couldn't explain to her at the time what the difference was. I've studied that since.

In *God Passes By*, there is very good information. So much of it is still interpretation that it is difficult for some to be convincing of that. I feel that my life and how I live it is evidence of what I believe. I try to live an upright life, especially since my divorce. I believe even the way we handled that in such a dignified, respectful way with respect to one another and the family, was evidence of my belief. It shows how I want to treat others, and I believe they see me as a real example, but they would never let me think that they approve, much less that they are proud of me for how I live. Out of all my other relatives, my father's brothers and sisters, I'm probably one of the favorites for a lot of reasons.

Q: Do you see your mother's brothers and sisters?

Not as often. There is one family I see once in a while. I think that is because I am open and try to talk and extend myself, being open and share.

Part of my extended family seemed to be rather open for a short time about my being a Baha'i. People in town knew me and knew about my character before they knew that I'm a Baha'i. And we were good friends. Interestingly, some family members started trying to find out about the Baha'i Faith by going to their church leaders. One uncle who was a deacon in the Baptist Church decided from the answers to his questions, that the Baha'i Faith is a cult. One time, either during a church service or deacons' meeting, someone stood up to speak against it. They tried to bring out differences. One difference that they could agree on was that the Baha'is don't have their own building. This was a negative, that Baha'is have to pay rent to use other buildings for occasional large meetings.

One aunt would not read about the Faith. She had been given books and pamphlets, but she just wanted to read one or two paragraph(s) at a time. She would not read enough to get a sense of meaning. She finally angrily said, "I'll tell you what I think. The opinion of the community is that you (Baha'is) are not self-sufficient. You use other peoples' buildings." This was a point to look down on by the Baptist Church.

One time my brother came to me and asked what the Faith was about. He had heard talk about the "new group in town that was a cult." He heard that one of the members owned a business, and there was a concern about some sort of take over and about negative influence from the cult on the town. I tried to give my brother a lot of material, but he is not a reader. He had a tremendously difficult time procrastinating about the reading, and he finally gave the books back to me. My sister-in-law was very threatened. She was frightened by all the talk in that church.

I have since visited in their church. I know some of the members personally. It's different when they meet you, and they realize your high standards, maybe even higher than theirs in some ways.

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Janie called a couple days after this interview to share another family story.

Dad was building a house, and I was helping with painting. A young minister came. I told him I was a Baha'i. He said they did not cover that in his school. I offered to talk with him anytime to explain it. Dad was so embarrassed. He apologized for me to the minister and said, "It's out fault because we didn't take her to the church much."

I said, "It's because you encouraged my freedom to investigate and think for myself that I checked into the Baha'i Faith and recognized it as true."

Audrey Mike Parker
Wilmington, NC 1/25/2019