

Alberta). Space does not permit us to report this trip in all its exciting detail, but here are the highlights.

The team was received by the Black'foot Chief, the Council and seven Agency Personnel, and Mr. Kahn was given half an hour of their time with questions. A fireside followed that evening at the home of Arthur and Nellie Little Light, at which Chester showed slides and gave a talk on the Faith, the Navajo beliefs and prophecies, and the customs of his people and others. He related these customs and the faith to the Cause of God, and showed how the prophecies of native leaders and medicine men have been fulfilled through the B31), Bahá'u'lláh

Canadian Bahai News Issue 217 (Feb/Mar 1968) says the following delegates were elected to National Convention from SOUTHERN ALBERTA:

Samson Knowlton, Mrs. Helen Marshall, Mrs. Joyce McGuffie, Reginald Newkirk, Mrs. Sylvia Scott, Mrs. Enid Wrate.

Samson and Rosie Knowlton will be remembered as the bedrock of the Bahai community that emerged on Piikani First Nation. They were individuals of remarkable character, trusted and relied on by others, and motivated by the desire to make others happy.

They were generous hosts and held gatherings for both the Bahai community and for the local societies to which they belonged. What has always struck me about Samson and Rosie, is the generosity of spirit with which they reached across the gaping cultural divide between indigenous and 'white' people.

I was one of those white people they treated with kindness. I first met them as a young mother in the late 1970s when I attended one of their summer picnics. They had invited Baha'is from the region to a gathering by their house in the river valley, which featured a live outdoor concert of country and western music provided by their son, Clarence, and his band. Music reverberated from the temporary stage - across the Old Man River and up the hill to the town of Brocket. Cars parked along the narrow roadway or on any available spot of grass, and people brought contributions of food.

I had driven down from Carstairs with my infant son, David. As I write that sentence decades later, I hear a voice in my mind ask, "Did you really do that? Make a three and a half hour drive with a baby in the car, in an era before you had air-conditioning, heading to a Reserve where you scarcely knew anyone, other than that they were Bahai's and they had invited you?"

Another thought answers, "Well you must have. How else could you have had that moment in Rosie's living room where she showed you the kindness of inviting you to change your baby's diaper on her bed? I recall Rosie's carefully made bed as having a beautiful white bedspread – possibly a patterned chenille - tucked over it.

Rosie's daughter, Beverly, once told me that one of the things that had impressed her mom in her early encounters with white Bahai's in the late fifties, was that they would happily visit in an 'Indian' home. It was

understood that the reason white people didn't generally visit in their homes was that they considered them 'dirty'. The common (and utterly erroneous) slur 'dirty Indians' is known to anyone who grew up in this part of the world. I am still touched by Rosie's standard by which to assess another human being: will they enter my home in good will, as a guest?

In one of my early conversations with Rosie, she asked me if I'd ever met a lady called Bessie Eckstrand, who lived on a farm near Carstairs, the town I lived in for much of my life. I told her that though Bessie's nephew had been a classmate of mine, I didn't really know her. Rosie said she hoped I might meet Bessie and pass along her love and greetings.

I was stunned by the idea that a Piikani woman who'd lived on the Reserve near Pincher Creek all her life, had a white friend in Carstairs. It almost didn't seem to add up. Carstairs was not near a Reserve - so I had almost no contact with indigenous people as a child. I'd heard racist and pejorative comments about Indians at hockey games, in particular when Carstairs played against a team from Morley. The hatred with which those comments got hurled out over the ice scared me – they made me more fearful of my own townspeople than of the visitors out on the ice. But I hadn't actually met an indigenous person till I was a young adult attending my first Bahai feast in Saskatoon. There I met dear Thomas Asham, an elder from a nearby Reserve, and fellow Bahai. He was the kind of man at whose feet I would have liked to sit for long hours listening to the many stories he must have carried with him.

Rosie proceeded to tell me her story of how she met Bessie Eckstrand. As I recall, (though her daughter tells it somewhat differently) she met Bessie one summer when the kids were young – somewhere outside - not far from her house. Bessie's husband worked for the highways department and was stationed on the stretch of highway nearby. Bessie was looking for a spot where she could set up their holiday trailer for the summer months, to be near her husband with the kids. Rosie invited Bessie to set up beside her house - which she did. The two became life-long friends, writing letters or calling each other from time to time - till Rosie's passing in 1981.

When I asked Beverly Knowlton daughter about that friendship, she smiled and said, "Did you know Bessie had a daughter named Beverly? That's how I got my name."

So, hearing about Rosie's friendship with Bessie, it appears that the Bahai's weren't the only people who were willing to cross the cultural divide as friends, but in my experience these people were rare. They were two unusually big-hearted women.

Samson and Rosie's friendships with white people extended to allowing their youngest daughter, Bev, to live with the Wrate family in Lethbridge for a year to have the opportunity to attend what they hoped would be a better high school. Enid Wrate was an active and enthusiastic Bahai whom they'd met through Bahai activities. Cindy, their daughter was Bev's age and on week-ends often went along with Bev to be with her parents on the Reserve. Bev's memory of

school in Lethbridge, was that it was an unhappy experience of racism and she returned to her old high school the following year. The one example which she was willing to share was the comment, "If you put flour on your face, you could look like us."

Beverly gave me more background about her mom's early years. She said that her mom went to the Victoria Jubilee Home residential school near the Reserve, which opened in 1897. Rosie was an exceptionally good student and excelled at English, completing her schooling early. She wanted to be a nurse so requested permission to attend nursing school. But her request was denied by the Indian Agent. It seems all such decisions - decisions affecting every area of an indigenous person's life - were in the hands of the Indian Agent. He told Rosie, "You go back to the Reserve and get married and have babies. Indian women can't be nurses."

Here is a sample of Rosie's English - a letter written to her fellow Canadian Bahais in 1967 and published in Canadian Bahai News - explaining the importance of official recognition and formalized relations with government bodies.

April 1967

"Dear Friends:

There is a suggestion I would like to make to the Baha'is who are interested in teaching the Indian people.

An item which is of very great importance is that the Baha'i Faith is a legally authorized body and has the sanction and the approval of the government of Canada and also the provincial governments, especially where Incorporated assemblies are concerned.

Matters of this nature are held in high regard by the Indian people and this information will place the Faith to a considerable advantage in their estimation.

Loving greetings to all from the Peigan Reserve friends,

Most sincerely,

(Mrs.) Rosie Knowlton

Brocket, Alberta"

I find it hard to imagine that this articulate woman's desire to get advanced education required the consent of a government official. She did however continue learning whatever she could about medicine and got a job for a time at the Indian Hospital on the Reserve.

A part of me shouts, "Who did the Indian Agents think they were?" And "How could the government authorize this kind of control?" I am evidently just beginning to comprehend how profoundly unjust and racist the policies and practices of my country were. It was official Canadian policy that indigenous individuals were considered wards of the state, had no voting rights, and

couldn't leave their Reserves without a 'pass'.

Eleanora, their eldest daughter, told me of an incident affecting her father which he experienced at the hands of an Indian Agent. She said that as a young man, he developed a small lumber business getting lumber from the timber reserve connected to Piikani Nation. To hire some of the local people, he went to the Agent to request a loan for chain saws. He was given the loan, his business succeeded, and he soon went to pay it back. But in repaying it, he was refused a receipt. Samson ended up paying the entire amount again. My heart groans as I think of this; the one small incident of which I am aware.

As an indigenous person, Samson was not allowed a lawyer to fight such an abuse either. His daughter, Bev, told me that as late as 1972 when her own young husband died tragically, she wasn't allowed to get a lawyer to handle related legal matters without the explicit consent of the Department of Indian Affairs.

She also said that her father only got up to grade five at the residential school, because after that the boys had to work instead of attending classes. They farmed the land connected to the school, looked after the animals, did the yard work and so on. What she described sounded like a massive and systemic use of child labor to me.

But Samson had a keen and discerning mind. When he decided to investigate the truth of the Bahai Writings, he spent hours having Rosie read them aloud to him, her dictionary close at hand for the advanced vocabulary they often contained. Seeing the two of them sitting together this way is a vivid memory for their youngest daughter, Bev.

Samson became a recognized leader among his people. After his passing in 1985, *The Bahai World*, a yearbook of international Bahai accomplishments, states that "In 1960, Samson accompanied Canada's first native Senator, James Gladstone, a Blood Indian, to Ottawa to present to the federal government a proposal urging it to extend to native people the right to vote in federal elections. He was also instrumental in having eliminated the 'permit system' which prevented Indians from leaving the Reserve..."

His daughter Beverly said that while she didn't recall him making trips for Senator Gladstone, she did recall the Senator stopping at their house to speak with her father when she was a girl of ten or so. She said she'd answered a knock at the door, and not knowing the man standing there personally, she thought he looked like a 'white man'. Speaking in Blackfoot she shouted to her father, "There's a white man here to see you." To her utter astonishment, the 'white man' proceeded to speak to her in fluent Blackfoot. She said she was stunned.

Bev recalls only one major 'teaching trip' for the purpose of introducing the Bahai Faith to people on other Reserves made by her father, though that trip had an extended itinerary that included numerous stops across Canada. It's possible there were more, and in searching for news of his travels at the time, I have been able to find evidence of numerous trips to Browning, Montana where

the local Bahais relied on him to make contacts with Blackfoot people he knew there. There had always been extensive contact between the North Peigan of Canada which were Samson's people, and the South Peigan of Montana who were artificially separated by the establishment of the 49th parallel as an international boundary.

He also made trips to Siksika, another Blackfoot Nation located east of Calgary near Gleichen. Canadian Bahai News, Volume 205, describes Samson as being a member of a teaching team that travelled to that Reserve that included Chester Kahn (Navajo) of New Mexico, and the Baptiste Shortneck (Cree) of the Louis Bull Band of Alberta.

He is also listed among six delegates elected from southern Alberta to the National Convention in 1968, though I have yet to find further documentation of the trip he made to that Convention, or where it was held.

Knowlton's eldest daughter, Eleanora, said she recalled two major trips made by her father, and that these trips may have had a two-fold purpose. One purpose was the promotion of the Bahai Faith on other Reserves, and a second purpose - perhaps an assignment on the side from Senator James Gladstone - was to assess living conditions on Reserves across the country.

She recalls that on his first trip across Canada, he said was shown only the nicer homes that existed on reserves. When he returned home he reportedly told Rosie, "We are the poorest Reserve in Canada!" On his second trip, he decided to travel un-announced and see what living conditions were really like. He said he found many people living in extreme poverty, in homes with dirt floors and inadequate protection from the elements.

She added that when she was a young teenager, he even gave her a copy of the Indian Act and said "Here, you study this because you're gonna get an education and then come back and help the people."

In July, 2016, I attended a multi-community church service in Waterton Park about the findings of the 'Truth and Reconciliation Commission'. Numerous people from Piikani Nation were there and I recognized the name one of their speakers, Daryl Crowshoe. I thought he might be related to Joe and Josephine Crowshoe, the couple so closely connected with Bahai activity in the early years.

He confirmed he was indeed related to them and wondered how I knew them. I told him I used to come visit their friends, Samson and Rosie Knowlton, and knew them because I was also a Bahai. Daryl broke into a big smile of recognition and said, "Samson once told us he got to be the first Indian ever, to get on a jet plane and go far away - to a meeting - with the Baha'is."

In fact, Daryl may have heard this at one of the occasions Bev described to me as the community coming together to hear Samson tell about his travels. She said people were so rarely able to travel in those days, that when they did, everyone wanted to hear about it.

According to Bev, when Allan Prairie Chicken introduced Samson and Rosie to the first Bahai they encountered, Arthur Irwin, (Allan was Arthur's guide in his job as a government geologist) they had already been considering various Christian religions which were active on the Reserve. Samson had stopped drinking and the two of them were searching for a faith that would suit them both.

She said the Anglican church didn't move either of them, and her father didn't like the Catholic Church. These were the main choices on the Reserve, but it turns out Rosie was also familiar with Full Gospel, of whom she said they soon got disillusioned by 'all that jumping up and down'. It was in this context that the two of them enrolled as Bahai's in 1958.

It was during a fireside meeting when John Robarts visited with Arthur Irwin, that Samson chose to sign an enrollment card. Bev says that the way her father told the story was, "As I got up to sign my card, I was thinking to myself, 'I have found what I have been searching for'." And he really felt good about it. He finished signing his card and turned around. To his surprise, the others in the room, including his wife, were all standing behind him waiting to sign an enrollment card as well.

The couple went on to host many Bahai meetings in their home. Some of these meetings included distinguished Bahai guest speakers, among them Ruhiiyyih Khanum , John Robarts, Hasan Balyuzi, Hooper Dunbar, Peggie Ross, Angus Cowan, and members of the National Assembly of the Bahais of Canada. To each and all they extended the warmest hospitality. Numerous people remember Samson calling out from the door as they left, "Come back soon..."

Jean Hedley, a long time Bahai from High River, said that she also recalled Samson's booming bass voice calling to people to "Come back soon," as they left, and even more vividly recalled the sound of his voice raised in prayer. She said she recalled him – on more than one occasion - intoning the Bahai prayer, "All praise be to Thee, O my God, the source of power and majesty..." She said she still thinks of Samson when she hears someone read that prayer in a Bahai meeting.

Eleanora, showed me a photo of her parents surrounded by a group of kids - some of them white - others indigenous . She said, "In later years when I would hear Caucasian Baha'i children calling Mom and Dad 'Grandma' and 'Grandpa', I never felt threatened. I knew they loved me and I just accepted that this is how they were - making each person feel special."

Rosie kept a meticulous guestbook during the sixties which her daughter, Bev, showed me over a restaurant lunch one day. She had it wrapped in a beautiful soft scarf, like a precious relic which indeed it had become. As I looked inside, I saw familiar names, some with comments, and the dates written at the top in Rosie's meticulous hand-writing. One of the entries was a little longer than most.

It was from Noel Wuttenee, the first indigenous person to enroll in the Bahai

Faith in Canada. Mr. Wuttenee would have been living Calgary at the time, an artist who had studied at the Alberta College of Art in Calgary. Six year later he would be one of the indigenous artists who painted the murals that graced the 1967 'Indians of Canada' Expo pavilion in Montreal. Dale Lillico remembers him as a good-looking young man, dressed notably smartly.

His Jan. 23, 1961 entry in Rosie's guest book says, "This is the first Indian Baha'i fireside I've been in, and I'm happy to see the Indians take to the sky once again with the strength and power of Eagle wings. How far we will fly with the winds of Baha'u'llah's teachings, once again we can cry out with the Eagle's voice and be heard and live with a purpose!"

Some of the Knowlton's visitors stayed longer than for just a daytime visit. Frank and Judy Royal arrived one summer when their kids were young - after which it began to rain. The road down the hill from the highway to the Knowlton's home in 'Highbush' (down in the flats by the Old Man River) was made of clay. When it got wet it became impassably slippery. Royals found themselves stuck – unable to get up the hill for a week. However, in the hospitable company of the Knowltons, it became a week of shared meals, stories, and as Frank described to it Bev years later, "One of the best weeks of my life."

Ed and Jean Manybears were another couple who made the trip down to visit Knowltons and attend Bahai meetings in their home. They were from Siksika, the Blackfoot Nation east of Calgary, and had also learned about the Bahai Faith from Arthur Irwin. They were the first individuals from Siksika to enroll as Bahais.

I saw Jean Manybear's signature several times in Rosie's guestbook. On one of these trips, the Manybears brought the teenage Allsion Meltingtallow (later Healy) with them, sitting in the backseat of their car. She is reported to have asked Jean, "So why do you like this Bahai Faith so much?"

Jean answered, "Because when the Bahai's read their prayers, I can smell God." Make what you like of Jean's comment, but to me it speaks of the rare moments in my own life when during reverential group prayer, the smell of roses has begun to build in the room. In the dead of winter, without an actual rose in the house, the scent became inescapable. I've whispered to women sitting beside me, "Can you smell that?" And they've answered, "I smell roses." It wouldn't surprise me if this is what Jean was talking about.

The Knowlton's hospitality also extend to the youth and they supported various activities that their daughter, Bev, participated in. Amy (Woodward) Singh of Cutknife, Saskatchewan sent me the following story of youth activities they hosted in the sixties at Piikani.

"Once when I was just a new Bahai, 1966 probably, some Edmonton youth (Virginia Evans who had a VW beetle, maybe Morine Fraser, and I) drove down on a weekend to support the Baha'i youth at Piikani. They were having a non-alcoholic dance. Clarence Knowlton and his musical friends - Alfrieda, Beverly, and I don't remember who else (Lewis Gunn maybe) - were involved. We hadn't made any

arrangements for where to stay but had thought we could roll out our sleeping bags in the hall and stay there. (Kind of a stupid plan...)

Beverly must have told her folks, because Samson and Rosie invited us to stay overnight at their house. It was so delightful! It reminded me of my grandma's house - cozy and colorful, with knickknacks on the shelves - and they were so good to us, so kind. I remember in the morning having bacon and eggs, something my poor university student budget didn't allow..."

The 1985 Bahai World "In Memoriam" article about Samson states, "Samson was greatly concerned about the well-being of his community and felt deep love for its members, especially the elders. He took care of the old people by keeping them supplied with firewood and fresh water..."

He was an elder and member of the Brave Dog Society, as was his good friend Joe Crowshoe. The Brave Dog Society was instrumental in setting up the Sundance, and Joe's mother was the woman who performed the sacred ceremonies necessary to hold it.

Rosie was on the local ways and means committee which had, as one of its accomplishments, getting water pumps for the homes. She also worked preparing lunches for the children at the school.

Eleanora said Rosie also belonged to what others jokingly called the "The Red Phone Club"; the name being a reference to the Cold War-era phone connection between the American President and the Russian leader. The 'club' had approximately seven members; ladies who had phones in their homes in the early days of rural phone lines and would call each other whenever significant or urgent events happened in the community. Dale Lillico was also one of the members, living next door to the Reserve and having close ties with so many of the people.

Writing about the Knowltons has filled me with a tenderness I didn't expect to experience. I was only a distant acquaintance. But everyone who's shared their memories of the couple with me has added to the feeling that these were indeed among the dearest of those who've passed to the spirit world.

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