

Exposition of 1893, among other things.

Miss Hilty's hometown was Enterprise, Kansas. Her mother, Mrs. Jacob (Barbra) Ehram, was a

Swiss emigrant who was searching for truth. Mrs. Ehram had helped found Enterprise; even before

the streets were laid out, and the prairie settled by Europeans, she owned and operated with her

brother the first store there. By the time her daughter went to Chicago, Mrs. Ehram was the

wealthiest woman in Enterprise. But material goods and social status did not satisfy the yearning in

her soul; she sought out one teacher after another, and when Josephine told her of the teachings of

Mr. Kheiralla, she invited him to Enterprise to teach.

Mr. Kheiralla arrived in Enterprise in July 1897 as a guest of the Ehrams and held classes in the

parlor of their home which attracted considerable notice. An article in the weekly Enterprise paper

was headlined: "The Bible Is Not the Truth." 2 The day before, the weekly in Abilene, just down the

road, headlined its article "Teaches Strange Things." 3 Both articles appeared at the top of the front

page; the Abilene article was reprinted in both major dailies in Topeka (the state capital, 80 miles

away). One carried the same headline, while the other announced: "Hoffman's New Religion: The

People Found Out What Ails Agricultural College Regent." 4 This was a reference to one of Mrs.

Ehram's nephews who apparently attended a few of the first classes. His activities in Kansas

politics guaranteed ample publicity for Mr. Kheiralla's visit and classes.

Accounts of class size ranged from 22 to 27 students, most of whom were relatives of Mrs.

Ehram's or other members of "polite society" in the area. The evidence suggests that eight of them including four family members- accepted the Faith at that time: with one more enrolled later in the

year. So it appears that there were at least nine Baha'is in Enterprise, Kansas, in 1897.

Today a district, regional or national teaching committee would send someone to help them form an

Assembly and begin community activities such as the Nineteen Day Feast. Each member would

receive The American Baha'i which not only has news of Baha'i activities across the country but

also carries catalogs and other information from the Baha'i Publishing Trust. Baha'is from nearby

communities, many also having Assemblies, would no doubt visit the friends in Enterprise whose members would be invited to district conventions, summer and winter schools, and other area-wide events.

But that is today, not 1897, 1898 or 1899. Then, the closest Baha'i community was in Chicago, some 600 miles away, and much more remote than it is via a two-hour plane flight. There were no other Baha'i communities on the continent. In fact, there were only a handful of isolated Baha'is, one in Nebraska, another in South Dakota, with the nearest in Kansas City (where there were two, but one of them moved to Enterprise in 1903), and Josephine, who moved to St. Louis. These others were more alone and isolated than the Baha'is in Enterprise.

As for studying, there were only two booklets in all of America on the Faith, both written by Mr.

Kheiralla and both containing his own personal ideas. There was no other source of information in

1897: no books, no magazines, no pamphlets, no cassettes, no movies, no radio station, no

scriptures. Only the two little booklets. How could these early Baha'is

possibly have any idea of

what a Baha'i community should be?

The Baha'is in Enterprise did see one another; they were related by family ties or moved in the same

social circle. But there was no Assembly, and there were no Feasts, deepenings, prayer meetings or

any other gatherings of a Baha'i nature. Excerpts from some of Mrs. Ehrsam's letters to Mr.

Kheiralla's secretary give evidence of their situation (spelling is from the original): "This is the first

time I attempted to write to you although I wished to have done so many times since I had the

teachings which makes a bond of unity between us." ⁶ This was written in May 1899. And in

another letter she writes, "It's been such a long time since I heard of you

We are a little band of

believers here but have no one to instruct us What has become of Mr.

Chase? He used to write

to one of the believers here but no one has heard lately." ⁷ She asks if the

Getsingers could stop on

their way to California: "Let me know how the believers are prospering and how they grow in

grace and knowledge" ¹

The only evidence she gives of further activities together are the lines: "We

(Rose Hilty, her daughter-in-law) live close and see one another every day. We talk much about the blessed truth and long to hear and know more about (it?). 'Oh God give me Knowledge faith and love' is the desier of my hearth at all times." 9 She closes, "Hoping to hear from you soon I remain yours for the truth, Mrs. J B Ehr- 5am" 10

Later, in 1912, one of the Baha'is in Enterprise, with her daughter who had accepted the Faith sometime after Mr. Kheiralla's visit, met 'Abdu'l-Baha in Chicago. Elizabeth Renwanz is listed in The Dawning Place as having attended the ground breaking ceremony for the House of Worship in Wilmette, but no city is given for her. i 1

Shortly after the turn of the century, Rose Hilty and her family moved to Topeka, becoming the first Baha'is in that city. The Baha'i community of Topeka has been continuous since then. The family returned briefly to Enterprise in 1917-20, during which time a couple of contributions were received by Bahai Temple Unity from the Baha'is of Enterprise (some had been received up to 1912).¹² But no record has been found to indicate that the Baha'is of Enterprise ever gathered together for any Baha'i activities after Mr. Kheiralla left them. One long-time resident recalled the mother of Elizabeth Renwanz holding . 'religious meetings" in her home about 1912,^{1]} but nothing further is known about them.

Owing to the lack of solid evidence we cannot claim that Enterprise was the second Baha'i community in America. But of one thing there is no doubt: it was the second location of organized Baha'i teaching on this continent. And that alone will assure a place in history for the Baha'is of Enterprise, Kansas, of 1897.

NOTES

1. Abilene Weekly Chronic/e, Abilene, Kansas; July 16, 1897, p. I.
2. Enterprise Journal, Enterprise, Kansas; July 17, 1897, p. I.
3. Abilene Weekly Chronic/e, Abilene, Kansas; July 16, 1897, p. I.
4. Topeka Daily Capital, Topeka, Kansas; July 14, 1897, p. 3.
5. "Supplication Book of Students in Miscellaneous Cities, from 1895 to (blank),"National BaM'i Archives, Wilmette, Illinois.
6. Letter dated May 3, 1899, from BarbraEhrsam to Maud Lampson, in "Maud

Lampson papers,"

National Baha'i Archives, Wilmette, Illinois.

7. Ibid.

8. Letter dated from internal evidence to be late in 1899 from Barbra Ehram to Maud Lampson, in

"Lampson papers," National Baha'i Archives.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

11. Bruce W. Whitmore, *The Dawning Place* (Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1984), p. 246.

12. Contributions ledger, Bahai Temple Unity, National Baha'i Archives.

13. Helen Erickson to Duane Herrmann, letter of October 23, 1980, in the author's possession.

— Enterprise: Second Oldest in U.S.? (Used by permission of the curator)