

whatever way she could, but it was not until early 1947 that she became a Bahá'í.

Between 1947 and 1953 the Australian Bahá'ís pursued a six-year teaching plan in which Thelma's support for Clara Dunn, and companionship with her during innumerable teaching trips was invaluable. Together they visited Bahá'í communities in such far-flung places as Wollongong, Adelaide and Brisbane. At Ridvan 1948 they flew, together with Mariette Bolton, to participate in the formation of Woodville Local Assembly in Adelaide, South Australia. At this time Thelma served on the library committee of the National Assembly, on the Regional Teaching Committee for New South Wales and on the Sydney Assembly. She helped organise National Conventions at the Hazirat'l-Quds at 2 Lang Rd, and participated in summer and winter schools at the Yerrinbool Bahá'í School. Meetings were conducted at "Bidura", Thelma's residence at Bowral close to the Yerrinbool School, and at her home in Mosman. In 1950 she donated several acres of land to the Yerrinbool Bahá'í School on the condition that the fact not be publicised and that the land not be named after her.

Great efforts were being made at this time to establish Bahá'í communities in the larger country towns, away from the big city centres where large communities already existed. Thus, in January 1952 Thelma was in Ballarat for World Religion Day and in March she and Dulcie Dive visited Wollongong and secured the Miners' Hall for that community's holding of feasts and special anniversaries for the remainder of the year. In 1953, at the close of Australia's six year plan, Thelma moved temporarily to Grafton in northern New South Wales, to fulfil her commitment to establishing a locality there.

Throughout the decade of the World Crusade (1953-63) Thelma served simultaneously on the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Australia and New Zealand, and as an Auxiliary Board Member to Hand of the Cause Clara Dunn. She was first elected to the National Assembly in January 1954 when a by-election was held to replace five members who had chosen to pioneer in the Pacific; and was appointed an Auxiliary Board Member several months later. At this time the relationship between elected and appointed institutions was still evolving, and Clara Dunn appointed Thelma Perks and Collis Featherstone as her Auxiliary Board Members during National Convention in 1954. After explaining to the assembled delegates and observers that the Guardian wished her to appoint two assistants, then placed her hand on the shoulder of Collis

Featherstone who was sitting beside her as chairman and said "I appoint Collis, and Thelma Perks, standing up the back of the room!"

From that time forward

Thelma travelled constantly both in Australia and in the Pacific, visiting Bahá'í communities to encourage them in their work. In 1954 she accompanied Clara in visiting Bahá'í communities in Queensland, Victoria, South Australia, and Tasmania; and the following year the two re-visited Victoria and Queensland. In 1955 Thelma visited New Zealand, and late in 1956 she made her first visits to Noumea, Vila, Papeete, Apia and Suva, before returning to Sydney via Auckland. No-one was more capable of raising the spirits of the isolated pioneers, of cheering their hearts, and comforting them in the midst of their physical hardships and deprivation. And yet no more incongruous scene can be imagined than this woman, regal in appearance, gracious in manner and elegant under all conditions, travelling and living in circumstances of extreme discomfort and improvisation. No-one enjoyed this paradox more than Thelma herself.

She later recalled her

first visit to Knight of Bahá'u'lláh Bertha Dobbins who had settled in Vila in the New Hebrides (now known as Vanuatu). For ten days in 1956 she slept on three boxes in a spider and cockroach infested room beneath swarming mosquitoes, in a mosquito net full of holes. "Once I got into that bed", she recalled, "I just lay still. I wouldn't stick my big toe out for anything!...because the rats were mighty things. Bertha had slung a wire across the room with a bit of a curtain and the rats used to walk up and down that wire while you were just sitting there". Such situations were encountered in many locations across the next two decades.

In 1957 Thelma attended

the first New Zealand National Convention before moving on to Fiji, Samoa, the Cook Islands and Tahiti. While in Fiji visiting Irene Williams and the Fijian Bahá'ís she stayed overnight in a traditional village, bathing in a running stream and living on fish, dalo and rourou - green leaves cooked in coconut milk. In the evening she joined in traditional dancing and singing until midnight. She regarded the landscape of Papeete, where Edith Danielson and Dulcie Dive had settled in Tahiti, as the most glorious of any natural settings she ever experienced.

It was in 1957 also that

Thelma first visited Alvin and Gertrude Blum in the Solomon Islands, and Vi Hoehnke and Rodney Hancock in Papua New Guinea. A trip organised by Rodney Hancock to take Thelma to meet the

Bahá'ís on New Ireland provided yet another tale which she later enjoyed retelling. In order to make the trip down New Ireland's only and remote road, Rodney hired a utility on which Thelma rode in comfort seated on a lounge chair placed on the back. When a jeep appeared travelling in the other direction and the two vehicles had to slow to pass each other on the single track, an Australian man observed Thelma with her white raincoat, red umbrella, all dressed up for any type of weather, and called out "My God, what are you doing here?", to which Thelma replied "Well, I'm staying with friends of mine". He said his wife was up ahead and that she was welcome to stay with them, or call on them if she needed help, to which she replied that she was with her Bahá'í friends and that they were all brothers and sisters. Many such tales did Thelma have for the telling.

In 1957 the Auxiliary Board was expanded. Collis Featherstone was appointed a Hand of the Cause by Shoghi Effendi, and the two Hands in Australia, Collis Featherstone and Clara Dunn, appointed as Auxiliary Board members for protection Hugh Blundell in Auckland and Margaret Rowling in Suva; and as Auxiliary Board members for propagation Eric Bowes in Adelaide, and Thelma Perks in Sydney. Thus, while still a member of the Australian National Assembly, Thelma was occupied throughout Asia and the Pacific as deputy for two Hands of the Cause. In September 1958 she represented the Auxiliary Board Members in Australia at the 5th Intercontinental Conference in Singapore.

Within Australia Thelma continued to travel to various states explaining the plans of the National Assembly. During 1959-60 she visited more than twenty Bahá'í communities incities and towns in Western Australia, South Australia, Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland and the Australian Capital Territory. In 1961 she visited the Northern Territory, South Australia, Tasmania, and Victoria. While in New Zealand with Nell McMiles in 1962 Thelma visited nearly all Bahá'í communities in the country. For many years during the 1950s and 60s she continued to share responsibility for the National Teaching Committee, the National Reference Library, the National Haziratu'l-Quds, and for care of Clara Dunn. She shared responsibility for the events related to the opening of the House of Worship in Sydney in September 1961.

It was in 1961 that Thelma first visited Haifa. Clara Dunn had often asked when she was planning to go, and when she learnt that the Universal House of Justice was to be elected in 1963, she thought that she should go

before then. She turned to Greta Lake during a National Assembly meeting and asked "How about going to Haifa?" to which Greta replied "Alright". Thus Greta and Aub Lake went on pilgrimage with Thelma in April 1961. When both women were once again elected to the National Assembly in 1962, Greta turned to Thelma and said "We'll be going to Haifa for the International Convention. On route, Thelma visited Vietnam, rode elephants in Cambodia, and cruised through Greece. In Haifa she enjoyed sharing a room with Bahia Ford, from South Africa.

By the close of the Ten

Year plan Bahá'í communities had been established in many Pacific Islands, and in many additional centres across Australia and New Zealand, and the task of establishing and consolidating local and national assemblies was added to that of expanding the number of individual believers. During the Nine Year Plan Thelma continued to serve as an Auxiliary Board Member. In 1964 she attended the establishment of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Southwest Pacific in Honiara, Solomon Islands, and visited while on the same trip the Bahá'ís in Port Moresby, Lae, Madang, Manus and Rabaul. She continued to travel within Australia, although in 1965 she resigned as chairman of the Temple Services Committee when the Universal House of Justice decided that Auxiliary Board Members could no longer also be members of such committees.

In 1968 Thelma was

appointed to the Continental Board of Counsellors for Australasia, together with Howard Harwood and Suhayl Ala'i. The Australasian region included Australia and New Zealand plus all islands in the Indian and Pacific Oceans lying south of the equator and between longitudes of 80 degrees east and 120 degrees west including Portuguese Timor and the Gilbert and Ellice Islands but not including Indonesia. Thelma was trustee of the Continental Fund.

When addressing Bahá'í

gatherings, Thelma reminded the friends of the responsibilities and the devoted work of the Hand of the Cause in Australia, Collis Featherstone. She was able to remind the friends of their high calling, and enthuse them in the tasks at hand. The words with which she closed the Australian community's National Convention in 1970 convey something of the uplifting effect she had on the community. She commenced by reminding her listeners that the Dunns were the 'spiritual conquerors of a Continent' and that Shoghi Effendi had given nobody else this station, and went on to say "The Guardian used to praise the Australian Bahá'ís - we must justify his faith and confidence in us ...If we do not arise to serve, Abdu'l-Bahá says we fall to the rear

in the Army of Life - perhaps go out of the Faith ...There are many Bahá'ís moving about, footloose and irresponsible. We must be disciplined people. How are we going to bring in the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh if the Bahá'í Faith comes last in our lives?...Let us have more enthusiasm! We must draw upon each other. When we think each day of our bounties, it gives us new life. This Cause can renew every atom of the body...Call on us (the Counsellors) to help you to serve."

Thelma was loved and respected by the Australian Bahá'í community because she led by example. Although now weighed heavily with responsibilities as Counsellor, Thelma continued to travel throughout Australia and the Pacific. In 1971 she was accompanied by Nell McMiles to the Oceanic Conference in Sapporo, Japan. Soon after their appointment, the Counsellors arranged in conjunction with the National Assembly a conference in Melbourne to mark the 150th anniversary of birth of Bab. It was Thelma's privilege to introduce to the conference Hands of the Cause Mr Faizi and Mr Collis Featherstone.

The Counsellors organised other major conferences, including one immediately following annual convention in Melbourne in 1974 to mark the commencement of the Five Year Plan, attended by Hand of the Cause Dr Muhajir, and some 500 participants. In October 1974 the counsellors organised a conference in Sydney to coincide with the 155th anniversary of the Birth of the Bab, which was attended by 200 Bahá'ís. Thelma closed the conference by saying:

the five year plan
has something personal about it - it touches our hearts.
Self-sacrifice is at the core of everything - sacrifice
of our time, energy and resources. This is the challenge
of each one of us. We have the inspiration of the
pioneers that have gone out. Each one can do something,
according to our capacity.

Early in 1974 the Counsellors met in Noumea, then visited the New Hebrides, then Thelma and Vi also visited the Solomons. About 60 islanders became Bahá'ís during a week-end conference held there. They then moved on to Papua New Guinea. In July 1975 Thelma and Howard Harwood consulted with the National Assembly on such issues as international teaching projects, Overseas and homefront pioneering and travel teaching, community deepening, conferences and other major events in the national plans.

The Counsellors convened a

conference in Melbourne with the theme "Our spiritual strength in a declining world", which was attended by 278 Bahá'ís. There were addresses by Hand of the Cause Collis Featherstone, and Counsellors Ala'i and Hoehnke among others, and Thelma closed the conference with the announcement of the appointment of several assistants to the Auxiliary Board. In January 1977 all the Counsellors of the Australasian Board attended the Sixth International Teaching Conference, held in Auckland New Zealand.

Thelma's retirement from the Continental Board of Counsellors was announced in the Universal House of Justice's letter of 3 November 1980. Vi Hoehnke and Howard Harwood were retired at the same time. Thelma spent her years of retirement in her Mosman home, and continued to visit the House of Worship and participate in Bahá'í activities in the Sydney area. She was thrilled in her later years by the declaration of her niece, Annette Sherringham. Thelma retained her dignified bearing and cheerful nature in her final years, even though hampered in her movements and activities by a paralysing stroke. She will be remembered as a pure soul, and a gracious lady. She set a high standard for the learned in Abha. Following her passing, the Universal House of Justice cabled:

WE ARE DEEPLY
GRIEVED TO LEARN OF THE PASSING OF DEAR THELMA PERKS
WHOSE OUTSTANDING SERVICES FOR THE PROMOTION OF THE FAITH
IN AUSTRALASIA WILL LONG BE REMEMBERED HER LOVING CARE OF
HAND OF THE CAUSE CLARA DUNN HER DISTINGUISHED WORK AS A
MEMBER OF THE FIRST CONTINGENT OF AUXILIARY BOARD MEMBERS
FOLLOWED LATER BY HER APPOINTMENT AS A MEMBER OF THE
FIRST BOARD OF COUNSELLORS IN AUSTRALASIA TOGETHER WITH
HER MANY YEARS OF SERVICE AS A MEMBER OF THE NATIONAL
SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY OF AUSTRALIA STAND AS SOME OF THE
HIGHLIGHTS OF HER DEVOTED LABORS PRAYERS ARE BEING
OFFERED IN THE HOLY SHRINES FOR THE PROGRESS OF HER SOUL
IN THE ABHA KINGDOM ADVISE HOLD A BEFITTING MEMORIAL
SERVICE IN HER HONOUR IN THE MASHRIQULADHKAR A SIMILAR
SERVICE IS BEING REQUESTED IN SAMOA

ENDNOTES

Note: Footnote numbers have been lost in this online version.

1. Interview, 1982.

2. Interview 1 August 1981.

Thelma's membership card was forwarded to the NSA 21 January 1947. 0268/0070.

3. (Annual Report of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Australia and New Zealand Bahá'í Year 108, 11.)

4. Thelma made two teaching trips to the South Island of New Zealand in 1959. "The visit of Miss Thelma Perks during February and March was much appreciated. In her quiet way of visiting interested non-Bahá'ís and obtaining good press publicity for the Faith and its objectives, Miss Perks' visit was of inestimable value. She contacted the press in Christchurch, Oamaru, Dunedin, Wellington, New Plymouth, Hamilton and Auckland. Annual Reports Bahá'í Year 113 (1956-1957), 4.

5. Interview, 7 August 1981. In 1955 Thelma tried to contact an Aneityum Islander who was studying at a Presbyterian Theological College in Sydney to do translation into Aneityum (Annual Reports - 112 (1955-1956), 9.

6. "Thelma joined in very spiritedly with the simple village dances and really seemed to be enjoying herself." Irene Jackson to Asian Teaching Committee 30 June 1957. 0133/0036.

7. In 1958 Thelma visited throughout NSW & QLD

8. In 1960 year she visited Queensland. (Annual Report Bahá'í Year 117 [1960-61], 10.

9. In 1959-61 Thelma was on the National Teaching Committee. In 1948,51,52, 53, 1959 Thelma was on Reference Library Committee; 1948,1951,52,1953 on National House Committee. 1960 Thelma was appointed with Greta Lake to look after Clara Dunn and her flat at Lang Road. Annual Report Bahá'í Year 117 (1960-61), 2.

10. Bahá'í Bulletin 121, September 1964, 7.

11. Bahá'í Bulletin 133, September 1965, 11. In 1965 the National Teaching Committee placed on record its thanks for the work Thelma achieved in her capacity as Auxiliary Board Member: Bahá'í Bulletin 129, May 1965, 13. During 1965 Thelma visited Cowra, Parkes, Grenfell in September; Tasmania in November; and Melbourne and Ballarat in December. In February 1966 she visited Lismore, Tamworth and Newcastle: Bahá'í Bulletin 135, November 1965, 3. In January 1965 Thelma attended summer school and gave firesides at

the Temple. In April she visited Warringah for the feast of Jalal and "gave an inspiring talk on the Nine year Plan, and the privileges given to Bahá'ís to help in the fulfillment of this mighty task": Bahá'í Bulletin 130, June 1965, 13.

In 1966 Thelma visited PNG: Bahá'í Bulletin 148, December 1966, 10. November 1967 Thelma spoke at State public meeting in Sydney.

12. Bahá'í Bulletin
171, November 68, 6.

13. Eg, Bahá'í Bulletin
167 July 68, 14: Thelma read cable from HCF at convention, and "reminded the friends of the responsibilities and devoted work of the Hand of the Cause for Australasia and of the loving esteem in which he was held. On the aspect of teaching she accented the task of gaining another 30 LSAs in 60 months, an average of one LSA every two months. She felt that a greater sense of unity was required in our community. She also dwelt on the responsibility of the delegates present and hoped that everyone would be enthused to great heights of endeavour during the subsequent days of consultation."

14. Bahá'í Bulletin
189, May 1970, 12.

15. 176 April 69, 9 Thelma
visited Canberra. Bahá'í Bulletin 192 August 1970. Thelma and Howard Harwood spent the weekend of 1-2 August with 13 Bahá'ís of Southeast Queensland to discuss future goals and plans.

Consulted with NSA at
December 1970 meeting. At 1971 convention she read greetings from Hand of the Cause Collis Featherstone and spoke on the Continental fund. 1971 commenced a series of deepenings in her home on Saturday afternoons: Australian Bahá'í Bulletin 202, June 1971, 8. November 1971 Thelma was in Hobart, Tasmania, where she celebrated the Day of the Covenant, and spoke on several other occasions of Clara Dunn's meeting with Abdu'l-Bahá, and told of the life of Abdu'l-Bahá: Australian Bahá'í Bulletin 209, January 1972, 14.

.. Bahá'í Bulletin, 179
July 69, 2

.. Bahá'í Bulletin, 184
Dec 69, 4 Thelma told the friends how fortunate they were to be living in the time of the Hands of the Cause. Future generations will only be able to read about them.

.. Australian Bahá'í

Bulletin 235, October 1974, 8. In January 1972 Thelma spoke at Summer School on the Institution of the Continental Board of Counsellors: Australian Bahá'í Bulletin 209, January 1972, 8-9; and attended the Canberra Youth Conference, which was attended by Hands of the Cause John Robarts and Collis Featherstone. In 1973 she opened a Bahá'í information centre in Newcastle, and received radio, press and television coverage, two weeks before participating in consultations in Haifa at the time of the third election of the Universal House of Justice, then visited Europe: Australian Bahá'í Bulletin 222 April 1973, 8; 223, May 1973, 4, 8.

.. Australian Bahá'í
Bulletin 231, April 1974, 3.

.. Australian Bahá'í
Bulletin 242, August 1975, 7. In 1974 Thelma read Hand of the Cause Collis Featherstone's message to the opening of the new Haziratu'l-Quds in the Temple grounds, Sydney. In February 1976 Thelma attended a NSW conference with 120 adults attending. In October Thelma attended a seminar on "Teaching the Aborigines" in Perth: Australian Bahá'í Bulletin 257, December 1976, 11. In November Thelma attended an Auxiliary Board Member's conference at the University of NSW on the theme "Gift of God" and gave an inspiring talk on the heroic figures of the Faith: Australian Bahá'í Bulletin 259, February 1977, 13.

.. Australian Bahá'í
Bulletin 246, December/January 1976, 2.

.. Late in 1977 Thelma present at an RGC Meeting for Sydney, Hunter and Manning: Australian Bahá'í Bulletin 266, September 1977, 15. In August and September 1977 the Counsellors hosted "Covenant Institutes" in each state.

.. Australian Bahá'í
Bulletin 300, December 1980, 3.

.. In February 1978 spoke at Persian Conference in Sydney: Australian Bahá'í Bulletin 273, April/May 1978, 12. Spoke at National Teaching Conference September in Lane Cove National Park: Australian Bahá'í Bulletin 277, September 1978, 2. In September 1981 Thelma joined Merle and Jim Heggie, and Jeff Rodwell, in speaking of the early years of the Australian Bahá'í community at celebrations commemorating the 20th anniversary of the dedication of the House of Worship: Australian Bahá'í Bulletin 308, November 1981, 3.

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