

THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH IN AUSTIN
The Early Years

also

ANNA REINKE
First Bahá'í in Texas

by
Catherine Gent
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1912-1914

It was probably Anna Reinke who brought the precious Name of Bahá'u'lláh to Austin in 1912 or 1914. Anna was a young seamstress here when she visited her sister in Washington, D.C. about that time. There she heard the Message of Bahá'u'lláh. She became a follower forthwith and devoted the rest of her life to teaching the wonderful Message. (See her biography as the first Bahá'i in Texas).

1940s

Catherine (better known as Neenah) Smith came here from San Antonio, a widow with grown children and grandchildren. She had come into the Faith from a strong Christian Science background and was the only member of her family to accept the Faith. She was petit proper, always well-dressed, and absolutely indefatigable when it came to promotion of the Faith. Much of the success of the spread of the name of Bahá'i in Austin belongs to Neenah. She never stopped, taking the bus to East Austin and making friends with prominent school officials and church officials there. Neither she nor Anna had a car and neither had much money but they persevered putting stories in the newspaper, holding firesides and arranging public meetings and speakers. Anna moved to the country not too many years after Neenah came.

Neenah's son lived in College Station where Catherine Gent and her family were at the time and they met when Neenah would come to visit her son and grandchildren, becoming fast friends for as long as Neenah lived.

She was a wonderful woman and a true servant of Bahá'u'lláh and Abd'ul-Bahá'. She was not afforded a Bahá'i funeral or burial but her life of pure service was surely her passport to her Beloved.

1950s

Soon came Henrietta and Herbert Buder and their four children and then Henrietta's father, George Clark, from Colorado, an early Baha'i pioneer to other countries. Catherine Gent and her family lived in Austin from 1953 until 1955, during which time the public meetings and newspaper publicity were continued, often aided by visiting representatives of the national spiritual assembly who spoke at our meetings, and by other talented traveling Bahá'is who could charm an audience.

The national Bahá'i community was few in number in those days and there was frequent and intimate contact between the believers in all areas. You needed help, you got it!

1954

With the Buders, Catherine and her children and Mrs. Morris, a dear lady who declared in her late years and graciously offered her nice duplex in old central Austin for weekly study classes, and Neenah, we taught, using the hotels (the Stephen F. Austin and the Driskill) and the old Austin Public Library on Ninth, the meeting room in the basement, as well as the Howson Branch Library on Bowman in Tarrytown for public meetings. We held Holy Day observances and Feasts in our homes.

It was in 1953 or 1954 that we held a weekly series on "Progressive Revelation" in the Stephen F. Austin Hotel. George Clark and Catherine Gent took week about giving the presentation. Coffee and cookies were served to about ten to twenty-five guests each week!

1960

The first local spiritual assembly was formed here in 1960. We soon had many black believers bringing with them about nine or ten more children into the children's classes.

The first LSA was composed of Henrietta and Herbert Buder, George Clark, Phillip and Dorothy Trutza, Musette Christian, Frank Bethune, Neenah Smith and Bransford Watson. Three of those members were black.

1961

The Gent family returned in January of 1961, this time to stay. Teaching was still being done by public meetings, weekly "firesides" and Holy Day observances where we could involve the public with current topics and ply them with punch and cookies. The Stephen F. Austin's elegant and spacious meeting rooms on the mezzanine held many a Baha'i conference, local teaching event and state convention. Although Chris Gent was not yet a declared Bahá'i, he, as the hotel manager, was always wonderfully helpful and supportive. In fact, it is doubtful that we would have obtained the facilities all those times if not for his intervention!

The old East Austin YWCA was also one of the Bahá'is very best meeting places, on 11th street near what is now I 35. It was razed years ago but in its day it enabled us to make many black friends as well as furnishing spacious and affordable facilities in which to meet and teach. The weekly children's classes were held there to the tune of the old upright piano.

On reflection, it seems that there were many institutes and conferences back in those days. They were either brought to us "whole cloth" by an auxiliary board member or an NSA representative who hosted it or the materials were mailed ready-to-use and we provided our own coordinator and discussion leaders.

Some of the topics for deepenings in those early days were: a course on Bahá'i Law, lasting two days; Tablets to the Kings; Teaching the Minorities; Living the Bahá'i Life; and frequent LSA training institutes. Segregation was a burning issue and few groups chose to explore it, so the Bahá'is were outstanding in their fearless and loving presentations.

The principles still had great drawing power in the fifties and sixties: the oneness of religion; world peace, what with the Korean War that began in 1950 and the Vietnam War in the sixties; independent investigation of truth; equality of men and women; and of course the oneness of mankind that became a prime topic following the Supreme Court ruling in 1954 that desegregated the public schools.

Let it be noted here that in addition to closer ties with the national figures in the Faith, we also were closer to more of our Bahá'i brothers and sisters in Texas then. State Convention was the order of the day. Despite the fact that we have grown - and grown - praise be to God! - there was something good also about knowing almost every Bahá'i in the state! At state convention, you saw them all at least that one time each year. Party time! It was delightful. Sometimes it was hard to transact business for all the visiting and "catching up" going on!

Also, in spite of Texas' vast distances, the Bahá'i communities associated with one another often. San Antonio would host a picnic for Austin. Dallas had a special Bahá'i visitor and invited Austin and San Antonio and Houston. Houston would sponsor a deepening and San Antonio and Corpus would go. You might say we had to stick together - there weren't all that many of us.

Also, and this is very important because it says so much about our world today, color and ethnic origin were not the issues they are today. In fact, the word "ethnic" was not used, the phrase "life style" had yet to be coined and the special interest groups that so divide our society were few and less strident.

The following has to come under the heading of editorial comment but here goes: in addition to "Godlessness", another reason for our ills today must be laid to one dreadful fact - overpopulation! There is just so much land, air, water, food to go around and increasingly people watch their "piece of the pie" diminish and even disappear. (The rats are getting restless in their cages and the more rats, the meaner they get. Scared and irritable at overcrowding, they snap at one another).

1962

The teaching effort in Austin received a transfusion with the coming of new members into the community. Lura and Alvin Rouse arrived from Carrizo Springs. Side note here: in the late forties and until Catherine and her family left College Station in 1952, Lura and Catherine had collaborated long distance and put out the children's monthly Bahá'i newsletter and study booklet. We had not met but we corresponded frequently and together we mailed out to all the Bahá'i children in the state a pretty good little booklet, if I do say so myself! Anyway, Lura and Catherine were thrilled to finally meet when they came here to live.

A couple and their daughter came from Hawaii, Bill and Sookja Kim (Sookie) Winters and daughter Joanie. They had a nice house in northwest Austin and were very successful in "selling" the Message of the Faith at the same time they sold their home improvement products. Some of the first microwave ovens in Austin were sold by them, including the Gent's. They brought into the Faith such priceless jewels as Foy and Yvonne Justice and Roy and Naoma Hocker, both of whom had lovely homes which they generously opened to the community for all sorts of occasions.

Like the rest of American society, and indeed the world in general the Austin Bahá'i Community went through some troubled times during the social unrest of the sixties, the Vietnam War and the "there-is-no-difference-between-right-and-wrong" philosophies of the sixties and

early seventies. Adversities strengthen and instruct, however, and for us, they forged a stronger and more spiritual bond, praise be to God.

It was a God-given bounty that the Universal House of Justice came into being at this time to act as a beacon of light for an embattled world.

Also in 1963, a young Grover Gonzales, originally from Arre-
quippa, Peru, was sent here by his employer, an oil company, for
a stay of a precious two or three years. Although he could not
speak English, he learned well enough to earn his masters in geo-
logy from the University of Texas. Grover not only obtained his
degree, he also brought love and humility and a new depth of know-
ledge about the Writings rare in one humble Peruvian Indian who
learned of the Faith by teaching himself Arabic so he could decipher
the original Bahá'i texts and disprove it, to satisfy his strict
Catholic upbringing! He eventually became the chairman of the
National Spiritual Assembly of Peru.

He called our youngest daughter his little "ahn-gél." In truth,
Grover was the "ahn-gél"! He was saintly, like a Baha'i of the far-
distant future when we have learned our lessons and become more like
Abd'ul-Bahá'.

Soon after came the first Persian believers, to infuse the
American community with a renewed model of service to the Faith
and depth of understanding of the Holy Writings. Repression and
persecution of the Bahá'i Community in Iran did not begin with the
Islamic Revolution in 1979, of course. It only became more heinous.

There were the Meshgins, Khosrow and Nahid, Mehrdad Ehsani and
his brothers and another family with children. Khosrow soon became
chairman of the assembly. Others followed in a steady exodus from
their native country.

1970

It was about this time that the big international celebration and dinner that marked Intercalary Days and Naw Ruz were begun. The party alternated between the Justice's home in north Austin, the Gents, the Hockers and the Griffiths in south Austin and sometimes places like the public meeting room in Hancock Center, eventually settling at the Zilker Club House when it became so popular that it drew Baha'is from miles around.

In the early seventies, the public-meeting-advertising, etc. became too costly and above all, unproductive. That is when the teaching efforts were concentrated on the University of Texas campus and the Campus Club was formed, the Baha'i Association. We began holding all the observances and meetings there that we could, using the old Union Building meeting rooms, the Junior Ballroom, the BEB Auditorium and the Auditorium in Calhoun Hall on the west side of the esplanade. In 1973, the Baha'i Association spearheaded a major proclamation, comprising a month-long citywide proclamation culminating in a public meeting at Palmer Auditorium, which had a big portable sign out front for several days, "Baha'i Faith - Public Meeting - etc. etc." About one hundred people attended. The public proclamations were a far cry from the day in 1948 that we attended the Baha'i State Convention in a living room of a Houston Baha'i!

Speaking of 1948, please forgive a backward look here in the chronology so that an important event can be noted. It was 1958 or 1959 that Texas held its first Baha'i summer school! A site near Dallas (or Fort Worth? Nancy Dobbins will know) that was a camp for church groups and/or YWCA-YMCA, with barracks and cots and dining facilities and a swimming pool, all set in a grove of beautiful old trees.

The Dobbins and their two daughters joined the Galveston Baha'is including the Gent's two daughters and the Ibsen's daughter plus dozens more Baha'i children and their parents for a history-making five days of study and companionship and play.

Now back to the seventies: more and more Persians blessed our community with their presence including Enayattola and Mihan Moshref and their four children, and Farid Fathi and the Sadighians, Oumars and Homa Meshgin, the Vahdats, the Rastegars, the Hematis and so many others. As has been mentioned before, these lovely people from the land of the birth of the blessed Faith have enriched communities all over the world with their ancestral knowledge of the Writings and the deep understanding that the non-Persian may strive a lifetime to attain. Perhaps their being violently flung to the four winds had a divine purpose!

To conclude, here are some of the well-known servants of Baha'u'llah who visited or lived in Austin during these years:

Winston Evans, author of Baha'i pamphlets and essays and lecturer;
Leroy Ioas, Hand of the Cause;
Florence Mayberry, Continental Board of Counsellors, visited many times;
William Maxwell, Continental Board of Counsellors;
Marjorie McCormick, NSA;
Katherine McLaughlin, Auxiliary Board Member;
Tony Pelle, Public Information Director for the NSA, visited several times;
Paul Pettit, Auxiliary Board Member, lived here and later visited often;
Martha Root, world pioneer, visited Anna Reinke;
David Ruhe, NSA;
Velma Sherrill, Auxiliary Board Member, visited several times.

They gave the Baha'is heart and spoke to groups and held news conferences and held our hand when troubles threatened and deepened us and counselled us, just as their younger counterparts still do today

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ANNA REINKE

First Baha'i in Texas

The stupendous news of a new Revelator from God came to Austin probably about 1912 or 1914. Anna Reinke, a young Austinite, visited her sister who was a Baha'i in Washington, D.C. She accepted it forthwith, becoming, to the best of our knowledge, the first Baha'i in Texas.

Anna was a seamstress in Austin for many years and bought a city streetcar, probably in the forties, and moved it to her property on a hillside off Highway 71 South, the site of which was then known as Lohmann's Crossing and now is occupied by an Appletree store and shopping center at the south entrance of Lakeway.

It was a beautiful pastoral setting, in a grove of live oak trees overlooking the valley to the west. She called it Flintrock. She was a remarkably resourceful woman who lived alone, had her own ingenious water system installed, made all her clothes and her shoes (!), grew her own food, added a fine, comfortable patio and covered veranda to her "house" and still found time to correspond with Baha'is all over the world. Her teaching charts and loving letters and laboriously hand-written pages of long quotations and prayers from the Writings have been preserved, testimony to her dedication and undying love for Baha'u'llah and His Message.

Anna was eager to share her home with the Baha'is for any Baha'i activity. Many conferences and picnics and Holy Day observances were held there in the twenty or more years she lived at Flint Rock. It was her fond wish to give her land to the Faith

ultimately, to be used for the site of a Baha'i school, like the one in Bridgeport; however, she grew old and feeble and was obliged to deed the property over to her nephews - Anna never married - in exchange for care in a nursing home. She died in the Monte Siests Nursing Home on Dudmar, near Oak Hill, in 1971.

Anna was born to a German immigrant father, Paul Reinke, and a native Texan mother, Emaline Lohmann, on August 15, 1882, in Bee Cave, Texas. Her father was a merchant and Anna was one of six children.

In her last few years which were spent in the nursing home, she lived to see one of her attendants accept the Faith. She never ceased to teach!

She suffered a massive stroke and died less than three months before her 89th birthday, on May 24, 1971. She is buried in Maul Cemetery, a family plot of her nephew, W.D. Maul, somewhere near Austin.

When I think of Anna's passing, I remember the line from Wordsworth, ".....trailing clouds of glory...." Surely she did.

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This recollection of Anna by Catherine Gent, 1992 - 1993

A HAPPY EPILOGUE TO ANNA'S STORY

Yvonne Justice tells us that there were three Baha'is attending Anna's funeral! True, the nursing home did not notify the Baha'is of her death as had been requested but Lura Rouse spotted the funeral notice in the morning paper, services to be at ten o'clock in a mortuary on South Congress. She quickly called Yvonne at work and those two, plus Don Eakin, a young Baha'i living in Lura's home, attended.

Don asked permission to read a Baha'i prayer and did so. Burial was in a family cemetery and the services were private so we do not know where it is. However, it makes us very happy to know that Baha'is were there and a prayer was read.

Her old streetcar which had been moved from its site near Lakeway was spotted by a Baha'i, Michael Zargarov, in 1988, sitting under a shed near a home in the country south of Austin. Snapshots of it are in the archives.

Catherine Gent heard about the Baha'i Faith ^(in Augusta, GA.) in 1942, became a believer soon after and signed the declaration card in 1947 when life returned to normal following World War II.

She and Chris lived in College Station from 1946 until 1952 where she was the first Baha'i to arrive in that area. The A & M newspaper, The Battalion and the Bryan paper, The Bryan Daily Eagle, were very good about printing long articles and letters to the editors about the Faith, and several representatives from National came and held public programs.

She had met Anna Reinke earlier, in 1952, while the Gents were living in Wimberley and she and her daughters traveled to Austin for events held at Anna's place in the country.

In 1953, she moved to Austin with the family. In those early days Austin did not have an assembly and teaching was by study sessions in private homes and public meetings in rented facilities. Shortly after Catherine was appointed to the district teaching committee, in 1955, the Gent family was transferred by the hotel company Chris worked for to Lookout Mountain, Tennessee. Chattanooga did not have an assembly, either, but did have Baha'is. Many local and visiting Baha'is from all over made their way to the lovely hotel on Lookout Mountain where Chris was general manager. That is where Catherine met Winston Evans who became her dear friend.

In 1957, the family was moved to Galveston where Catherine made the ninth Baha'i and Galveston's first spiritual assembly come into being.

In 1961, the Gents were sent back to Austin where Chris managed the Stephen F. Austin Hotel. Catherine served on the Austin Spiritual Assembly from 1962 until 1977.