

Martha Root's Journey to Chile

Contributed by

In 1919, at a conference in New York, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Tablets of the Divine Plan, the blueprint for North American Bahá'í activity, were read to a hushed and eager audience. His words conjured images of far off lands, little known to early 20th century American eyes, of places few had been, travel to which involved months of rail, steamer, car, and even mule. Following 'Abdu'l-Bahá's summons to arise and spread the Message of Bahá'u'lláh, the first to do so was a devout young woman named Martha Root.

Early Years

Born in 1872, in Ohio, the Root family moved to a dairy farm in Cambridge Springs, Pennsylvania, where Martha was to spend most of her young life. As Martha grew, it became apparent to all that Martha was most interested in intellectual and academic pursuits, things traditionally reserved for men, rather than the homemaking customarily delegated to women. After graduating from high school, Martha continued her studies at Oberlin College, and ultimately graduated from the University of Chicago.

She began her career as a reporter for the various newspapers in Pittsburgh, initially covering the comings and goings of the wealthy and worldly. As her career developed she served in a variety of capacities, from the editor of a woman's feature to one of the only automobile journalists in the world, taking her across the US and to Europe. A pattern was being set for a life of traveling, writing, and investigating the truth.

Chance Encounters of Faith

In 1908, Martha had a chance encounter with an early American Bahá'í named Roy Wilhelm. Their talk turned to the unity of the world's religions, an idea that aligned with Martha's own generous spirit and understanding of religion. One year later, after several meetings with Roy and Thornton Chase, the first US Bahá'í, Martha declared her belief in Bahá'u'lláh as the Messenger of God for this Day.

Several years later, in 1912, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to the US proved to be a landmark, both in the development of the American Bahá'í community and Martha's own growing religious faith. She saw first hand, in the way 'Abdu'l-Bahá treated everyone he came into contact with, showering his love on everyone he met, rich or poor, black or white, woman or man, how a Bahá'í should be. Martha's visits to 'Abdu'l-Bahá in later years solidified the bond between her heart and the fledgling Faith. Her inclinations to travel, meet new people, and report on her experiences found their natural expression in the Bahá'í community's need for Bahá'ís to travel to new areas and be introduce the Faith to ever larger numbers of people.

World Traveling Teacher

In the summer of 1919, Martha left New York City by ship bound for South America. Spreading word of her beloved Faith from her first moments onboard the ocean liner, Martha took every opportunity to share the Bahá'í message of peace and the oneness of humanity during her journey south. Stopping first in Brazil, she also spent time Argentina and Uruguay before setting out to cross the Andes mountains into Chile.

Over the "Top of the World" and to the Ocean

In the middle of winter, Martha made plans to enter Chile by crossing the Andes mountains. She originally meant to travel by car, only to be turned back when the road was covered in a landslide. A company of mules was secured for this arduous leg of the trip. Martha writes in her journal that,

"The trip by mule back over the 'top of the world', for the Andes are among the highest ranges, the Aconcagua rising to a height of 23,300 feet, was thrilling enough for the most sensational. To pray the Greatest Name [Yá Bahá'u'lláh, an Arabic invocation meaning 'O Thou the Most Glorious of the Glorious'] among these minarets of God was to glimpse the glory of the Eternal, Unknowable. The ancient trail led 10,400 ft. above sea level. The people on mule back were infinitesimal specks clinging to mighty terraces that bear no other appearance of humanity except the cavalcade. As 'ants in an endless and boundless forest' so they huddled on the edge of jagged peaks, frozen chasms, and stiffened mountain torrents.*"

Later, referring to the cold that they all felt, Martha said she wore "three suits of woolen underwear, two sweaters, two coats and a steamer rug, and then nearly froze to death."

Pausing briefly in Valparaiso, Chile, a major city on the bay, and Santiago, the capital, Martha made the most of her short time to meet with civic and cultural leaders in both cities, as well as with journalists. Her visit cut short by the demands of travel, Martha became the first Bahá'í to visit Chile and spread word of the new Manifestation of God, Bahá'u'lláh. Struck with illness, but determined to carry out her mission of love, she writes of "leaning against the friendly lamp posts for strength to drag one's self back to the boat," and that because of the contacts she made and the nature of the people, "other Bahá'ís traveling to South America will be joyfully received."

Legacy

Twenty years after visiting Chile, while in Hawaii and serving her beloved Faith literally to the very end, Martha succumbed to the cancer that had shadowed her Herculean efforts for so long. Martha's complete devotion to her Faith and loving, humble manner that was inclusive of all and exclusive of none has left an example of both a sterling character and true service to the divine.

No testament to her life, service, and character can surpass the words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in a letter written to her upon the completion of her travels in South America.

"It is clear and evident that the power of the Kingdom is aiding thee, that the glances of the eye of His loving kindness are turned toward thee; Before long the results of this mighty undertaking will be uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of all men. Therefore be thou assured that this call to the Manifestation of Bahá'u'lláh, this proclamation of the Word of God and the promulgation of His Covenant shall influence stone and clay, how much more the children of men;."

What then for us, inheritors of the Bahá'í community Martha daily struggled to serve and expand, but to arise similarly in instant obedience to the head of the Bahá'í Faith, now calling for international, wholehearted support for the building of the last continental House of Worship.

*Martha Root: Lioness at the Threshold, by M.R. Garis p. 104

** Martha Root: Lioness at the Threshold, by M.R. Garis pp. 111-12