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Baha'i Peace Park continues to grow

By Carol Handy

A few miles south of Muskegon, and directly across Lake Michigan in Wilmette, Ill., stands the Baha'i House of Worship, lending its distinctive dome as a guiding point for airliners coming to Chicago's O'Hare airport, and freighters and sailboats emerging from lake voyages.



In the center of the Baha'i Peace Park is this nine-point inlaid granite star symbolizing nine of the world's religions. The park is in the 500 block of Marquette Avenue. Master gardener and designer Deb Pless, center, designed the park with the help of Nancy Watters, left, who was project coordinator and Goldman Bradshaw, on right, who helped build and tend the garden.

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In the earliest years of the 20th century when the Baha'is of the world were slowly gathering funds in the hope of building the first Baha'i House of

Worship in the Western Hemisphere, the head of the committee was a Chicago woman, Corinne True. She spent her summers in Fruitport and she established the Baha'i faith in Grand Rapids, Muskegon, Fruitport and Pentwater.

The Baha'i faith was born in old Persia in the last half of the 19th century. A heraldic figure, called the Bab, or the Gate, announced that he was the one through whom the Promised One of all ages and all religions would be made known. After winning thousands upon thousands to His call, the religious authorities became concerned these new believers might overthrow the government or threaten their own power over the people and a systematic program of persecution began. Over 20,000 followers of the young Bab died for their faith in the next 19 years.

In 1863, the Promised One foretold by the Bab announced his ministry to the peoples of the world. Imprisoned and banished, he remained in Akko, in what is now Israel, for 40 years until his passing in 1892. Since that time the Baha'i Faith has spread virtually everywhere in the world, and now is the second most widely spread religion on the planet, with followers numbering in the millions.

During those early years of the 1900s, a widow in Chicago by the name of Mrs. Holcomb was dying. She was very distressed she would be leaving her children orphans with no support. Her only relative was her elderly mother who lived in Muskegon, and who had no room for the children. Times were hard and the only way Mrs. Holcomb's mother could earn her livelihood was to take in washing, ironing and sewing.

Someone had heard that the Baha'is were kindly people who had helped out a family which had been flooded out, and suggested that perhaps they could help her. The Baha'i Women's Assembly of Chicago, using money they had intended for the Baha'i Temple Fund, instead purchased a house on Marquette Avenue in Muskegon and allowed the grandmother to live there and rear her grandchildren.

When the elderly grandmother passed away, the property was deeded to the Local Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Muskegon. They wrote to the head of the Baha'i, Abdu'l-Baha, who was residing in Haifa, Israel, the religion's world center, asking him what they should do with this property. He replied in a tablet from which is quoted the following: "As to the site for the future Mashriqu'l-Adhkar of Muskegon, leave ye as it is and perhaps in the future God will bring forth a plan."

After Abdu'l-Baha's passing and during a "period of austerity" instituted by the new leader of the Baha'is, the Muskegon Assembly again wrote to the World Center, asking if perhaps they should sell the property and contribute the proceeds to the National Fund, then much in arrears. The reply was that if Abdu'l-Baha said it was the site of a future house of worship then by all means they should keep it.

As the years passed, the neighborhood deteriorated to a great degree and

the house itself grew unsafe. The local assembly had no funds to repair it so it was eventually torn down by the city. The struggling assembly of Muskegon had barely enough funds to keep the empty lot up to city standards, so once more the group inquired if it should sell the property. Again the answer was "Keep the property." Meanwhile, the neighborhood began to improve.

In the mid-1980s, the Muskegon Local Assembly decided to make a little park of the vacant lot and encourage neighborhood residents to enjoy its peaceful space. There are a number of lilac bushes, grown old and lovely, which bloom each spring, and the entire block is shaded by stately old oaks. The Baha'is, over a period of some years, slowly acquired vacant lots adjoining the property on either side, until at the present date they own the entire south side of the city block on Marquette Avenue, with the exception of two houses, one on either end. They have constructed a little garden, designed by PlessLane Designs of Spring Lake, surrounding a nine pointed star of brass inlaid in a cement circle, and fitted with benches. The neighbors often come there to meditate or relax. The area has come to be known as Peace Park.

Over the years the Baha'is have treated the neighbors as friends, and occasionally have picnics to which the neighborhood is invited. Featuring gospel singing by local church choirs and other music, the Baha'is give talks on the faith, make literature available, and, of course, offer face painting and games for the children -- and lots of food. One neighborhood couple joined the faith. The husband, until his death, was a devoted member and a self-appointed guardian of the park.

Still, even with the development that has occurred so slowly, there have been moments when the Baha'i have wondered if the promised House of Worship will ever rise there. A recent letter from the Universal House of Justice stated that now that every continent has one House of Worship built, it is time to begin building National Houses of Worship and even occasionally, some Local Houses of Worship. The construction of these Houses of Worship is never just a local process. Each House of Worship anywhere in the world is financed by the Baha'is of the world, which means it will be a long time before a building can rise on Marquette Avenue. But while the Baha'is of Muskegon, and those all up and down the Lake Michigan coastline, know "their" house of worship will not be built until many years into the future, they are encouraged. Because almost simultaneously with the receipt of that letter, the first lot on the Leonard Street side of the Marquette Avenue block came up in a tax sale and has since been added to the existing holding.

A new committee recently formed to carry the Baha'i Peace Park into the future. Right now that means holding programs on the property to further befriend the folks in the immediate neighborhood and reintroduce the property to the citizens of Muskegon.

Last summer the 2012 Year of Understanding Interfaith Group sponsored a day of visits were to a number of local churches, a synagogue, a mosque and to the Baha'i temple site at Peace Park. Later, in the fall, the local

Congregational Church sponsored a series of four public talks on the Baha'i Faith, one each week during September, and they were well attended.

Baha'i Houses of Worship are not Baha'i churches, as such. They are, rather, gifts of the Baha'is to the people of the area. So the neighbors come to Peace Park, and the garden there is offered as a place of meditation and relaxation for everyone.



Carol Handy is a Muskegon resident. She has written poetry, speeches and articles on the Baha'i faith along with a fairy tale called, "The Dragons of Rizvania." She has served at local Baha'i institutions and also at the World Center of the Baha'i Faith in Haifa, Israel, as the editor of the Baha'i International News Service in 1989 and 1990.