

SHINING LAMP

A Bahá'í who served humanity with radiance

EFFIE BAKER (1880–1968): Picture of Courage By Gail Radley

A woman died here, Effie recalled. She gazed at the ruined luggage scattered by the road to Baghdád. A Bahá'í traveling with the woman had said that bandits also shot off their driver's ear. They took what they wanted, leaving the rest to rot. Effie and her companions hoped bandits wouldn't bother several cars traveling together.

Bandits weren't the only danger. It was 1930. Effie was a 50-year-old unmarried Australian woman traveling to Persia (now Iran). There, neither westerners, nor Bahá'ís, nor independent women were welcome. Foreigners were seen as spies. Bahá'ís had been persecuted and even killed since the Faith began there in 1844. Persia still wasn't safe for Bahá'ís.

Effie was going to Persia to take pictures, but her photography risked attracting unwanted attention. Shoghi Effendi, the current Bahá'í leader, had asked Effie to document the Faith's historic sites. The task couldn't wait. First, Shoghi Effendi needed photographs for *The Dawn-Breakers*, a Bahá'í history book he was translating. Second, Persia's leaders, eager to create modern cities, were destroying old buildings. They weren't concerned with preserving Bahá'í history. In fact, they wanted to eliminate it. This mission required a skilled photographer. It also required a brave, daring one.



Effie was a gifted photographer who risked danger to take photos for the Bahá'í Faith. One type of camera she used is shown below.

Adventurous Spirit

Happily, Effie was both. From her sea captain-astronomer-inventor grandfather, she learned to enjoy working with technical equipment and observing carefully. She shared his adventurous spirit, too. She also developed her artistic talents. She played piano, painted, drew, worked with wood, made toys, and explored photography. Then, in 1922, Effie became a Bahá'í. She soon traveled to what is now Israel to meet Shoghi Effendi, staying five years to serve the Faith.

Now, she was heading to some villages no westerner had visited. The three-month trip became six as she and her companions moved through Persia. When they weren't repairing tires on rough roads, they were thawing a frozen car. They

also traveled by horseback on rocky mountain paths. Along the way, Persian Bahá'ís helped them.

Dangerous Visit

Effie's most dangerous visit was to a mosque. Only Muslims were allowed inside. "If they had ever suspected me," she wrote later, "they would have torn me to pieces . . ." Two Persian girls dressed Effie in a robe, her face covered. They entered the mirrored room, and Effie gazed in awe at the jewel-studded ceiling. She stepped into the courtyard, nearly tripping over a shrouded body. There were, she said, "dozens of them, bodies brought in to be blessed, [w]rapped in sack-cloth . . . They had died on the way . . ." Then the girls showed Effie a sign stating that foreigners entered "at their own risk." They hurried her away.

In all, Effie took nearly one thousand pictures, developing them as she went. This requires running water and a room lit only with a red safelight. Effie found creative substitutes: a blanket over her tent, a flashlight covered in red paper, and a bucket of water. She worked secretly to avoid causing suspicion.

Back in Israel, she chose 400 pictures for Shoghi Effendi. Without Effie's courage and creativity, images of the Bahá'í Faith's beginnings might have been lost forever.

