

SHINING LAMP

A Bahá'í who served humanity with radiance

Roy Wilhelm (1875–1951)

By Gail Radley



"Strange if true," Roy Wilhelm wrote on the article his mother sent him around 1898. It told about 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the leader of the Bahá'í Faith.

Since Roy's teen years, his mother had searched for Jesus Christ's return. Now she had become a Bahá'í. She believed that the Faith's founder, Bahá'u'lláh, was the return of Christ's spirit. But Roy was sure that the Faith wasn't for him.

In 1900, when Roy was about 25, he moved to New York. He worked for his father's coffee importing company. One evening, he had a surprising vision: a Man with a long black beard, dressed in robes, put His ring on Roy's finger and put Roy's ring on His own finger. Roy was stunned. He didn't tell anyone what happened.

Life-Changing Experience

In 1907, Roy's mother asked him to go with her to meet 'Abdu'l-Bahá in what is now Israel. There Roy saw the same room as in his vision—Bahá'u'lláh's room. Shaken, he shared the vision with 'Abdu'l-Bahá, who told him that Bahá'u'lláh had wedded him to His Faith. From then on, Roy was a devoted Bahá'í. He wrote, "Nowhere have I witnessed such love, such perfect harmony."

He returned home eager to tell others about the Faith. One of those was Martha Root, a reporter. Martha became a Bahá'í in 1909, and they began a lifelong friendship.

By then, Roy and his parents were living in New Jersey. When 'Abdu'l-Bahá visited the United States and Canada in 1912, he hosted a "unity feast" among the trees on the Wilhelms' property. About 450 people

of many races and backgrounds attended the joyful gathering. The event is still celebrated today as the "Souvenir Picnic." Roy later donated his New Jersey property to the Bahá'ís.

Friendship and Service

In 1913, Roy, his parents, and Martha took a month-long road trip, camping throughout New England. Fun, beauty, and adventure cemented the bond between all four. The following year, Martha began traveling the world to share the Faith. Roy wrote of her introducing the Faith to "so many tens of thousands over so many corners of the earth. I sometimes think my chief reason for being born was to get Martha started."

She often wrote to Roy. Sometimes she sent gifts—a pair of silver cufflinks or a rock for his wall or fireplace. Roy generously sent money to help her continue. Little was written about the Faith then. Roy created two pamphlets explaining the Faith and had thousands printed. They were translated into various languages, and Martha used them wherever she went.

From 1909 to 1946, in every year but one, Roy served on the councils that guided Bahá'í activity throughout the nation. Over time, he received many messages from 'Abdu'l-Bahá and his grandson, Shoghi Effendi. 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote to Roy, "I am extremely pleased with you because you are a true Bahá'í. Your house is My house; there is no difference whatsoever between yours and Mine."

When Roy died in 1951, Shoghi Effendi honored him with the title of Hand of the Cause of God.* The world was richer for Roy's friendship and service.