

Fred Mortensen

From Delinquent to Disciple



Early Years

- Born February 7, 1887 in Dodge, Iowa
- Third of 13 children
- Impoverished immigrant family from Denmark
- In 1893 the family moves to Minneapolis, MN
- Father unable to find work; takes to drink; abandons family
- After the 3rd grade, Fred, along with his brothers, quits school to try and support the family; they steal food, dig through trash cans for leftovers
- Fred hired for menial labor at *Minneapolis Star*; resents work; quits at age 10

Adolescence

- Fred & his brothers join a gang – for acceptance
- Yet **Fred's innate sense of superiority** makes him feel he could easily best those around him.
- Life on the streets turns him **hard & ruthless**
- He enjoys the rough & tumble, says, "fighting is a real pleasure, as welcome as a meal."
- He drinks too much, **enjoys** breaking the law, stealing, brawling, bullying others.



Criminal Activity

- He recalls,
 - *"breaking a grocer's window to steal his fruit or what-not was, as I thought, **a great joke.**"*



- The gang terrorizes immigrants, especially Russians & Jews. He relates
 - *"I can't begin to tell you how we **enjoyed persecuting them**, stealing their wine, breaking their windows, in fact doing everything but setting fire to their homes."*

Criminal Activity

There are two versions of how, while being chased by police, they were able to catch him after he fell and broke his leg. According to Mortenson's grandson, Justin Penoyer:



- In 1904, at age 17, the gang **robs a local train.**
 - His younger brother grabs a mail bag.
 - Fred notices police coming, **takes the bag and tells brother to run; police chase Fred instead.**
 - Trying to avoid a barrage of bullets, he jumps a wall, falls and breaks a leg; is arrested.
 - Prison doctor sets leg improperly – left with one leg shorter than the other, resulting in a permanent limp

Criminal Activity

- However, Mortensen himself writes:
 - *"...a young fellow was being arrested and I, of course, tried to take him away from the policeman. While this was going on a couple of detectives happened along and in my haste to get away from them I leaped over a thirty-five foot wall, breaking my leg, to escape the bullets whizzing around about — and wound up in the 'garden at the feet of the Beloved' as Bahá'u'lláh has so beautifully written it in the Seven Valleys."*



First Glimmer of Hope

- In his wonder at God's grace Fred writes about how he arrived at the gate to the garden of the Beloved through his own criminal activity:
 - *"I violated any law I saw fit, man's or God's. Strange as it seems to me at times, it was through coming into contact with these laws that I received the opportunity to be guided into this most wonderful Revelation."*

First Glimmer of Hope

- The gate keeper of the garden is the attorney appointed to defend him: Albert Hall, the son of a minister, who became a Bahá'í between 1900 and 1903



First Glimmer of Hope

- Fred recalls:
 - *"At this time I was defended by our departed, but illustrious Bahá'í brother, Albert Hall, to whom I owe many thanks and my everlasting good will for helping to free me from the prison of men and of self. It was he who brought me from out the dark prison house; it was he who told me, hour after hour, about the great love of 'Abdu'l-Bahá for all His children and that he was here to help us show that love for our fellowmen. Honestly, I often wondered then what Mr. Hall meant when he talked so much about love, God's love, Bahá'u'lláh's love, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's love, love for the Covenant . . . I was bewildered. Still, I returned, to become more bewildered, so I thought; and I wondered why. . . Thus the Word of God gave me a new birth . . ."*

First Glimmer of Hope

- Fred doesn't know how to read.
- Hall gives him two books, one about the Bahá'í Faith, the other a dictionary;
- Fred uses these to teach himself to read.



Poor Choices

- Even though the gift has been presented, Mortensen hasn't yet fully unwrapped it, and his instinct for preservation kicks in:
 - As soon as his leg heals, Fred attacks a guard, steals his keys, and escapes.



Poor Choices

- He ends up in Oakland, California where he works at the newspaper.
- After experiencing an earthquake, Fred hightails it back to the midwest, then travels to the Dakotas; finds work each time with the local newspapers.



Better Choices

- Fred comes across the book he'd gotten from Albert Hall. This time **the words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá reach deep into his heart.**
- After four years as a fugitive, he returns to Minneapolis, **knowing he'll probably be sent back to jail, but unable to resist the urge to reconnect with Hall and learn more about the Bahá'í Faith**
- To Fred's surprise, Hall, now District Attorney, doesn't have him arrested



Yearning to Meet the Master



- While living in Minnesota, Fred learns 'Abdu'l-Bahá will visit Green Acre, Sarah Farmer's home in Eliot, Maine (close to Portsmouth, NH) which was a center for the study of comparative religions
- He also hears the Master may not travel west
- Fred takes off traveling to Green Acre



Drastic Change in Mode of Travel

- On reaching Cleveland, OH, he attends a printers' convention before continuing his journey, but, anxious to meet the Master, he leaves before it ends.



Drastic Change in Mode of Travel

- However, **his funds are depleted.**
- Out of money, Fred **rides the rods, hobo-style**, on top, under trains, never inside – all the coal dust from the burning coal spewing forth, permeating his clothes and clinging to his skin.



Riding the Rods



On the Rods.

Yearning to Meet the Master

- In Fred's Words

*"... [as] I crawled off from the top of one of its passenger trains at Portsmouth, New Hampshire, I was exceedingly happy. A boat ride, a street-car ride, and there I was, at the Gate of Paradise. My heart beating double-time, I stepped onto the soil of that to-be-famous center **tired, dirty, and wondering, but happy.**"*

The Ballad of Fred Mortensen

The Ballad of Fred Mortensen
written, composed & performed by
Mike Rogers
from his CD,
Steppin' to a Brand New Beat



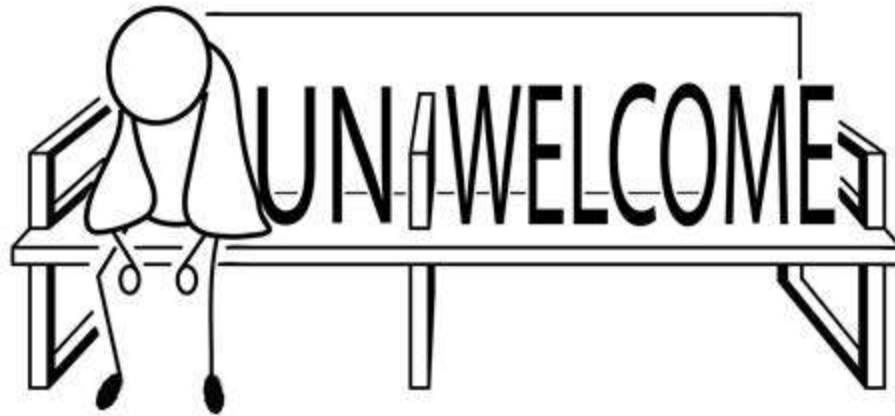
An Unwelcome Guest



- In a hurry to reach his destination, and with no money at his disposal, **Fred arrives in a disheveled state, covered in soot from riding for days on the outsides of coal-burning trains, smelling like the rail cars on which he'd traveled.**

An Unwelcome Guest

- Even with a letter of introduction from Albert Hall, **efforts are made to turn him away.**



An Unwelcome Guest Welcomed



- Two of the women, Mrs. Kinney and Barbara Fitting, ignore **the vigorous protests of the menfolk**, invite Fred in, give him the opportunity to wash up and offer him a bed for the night.

Moxie, Luck, Fate ???

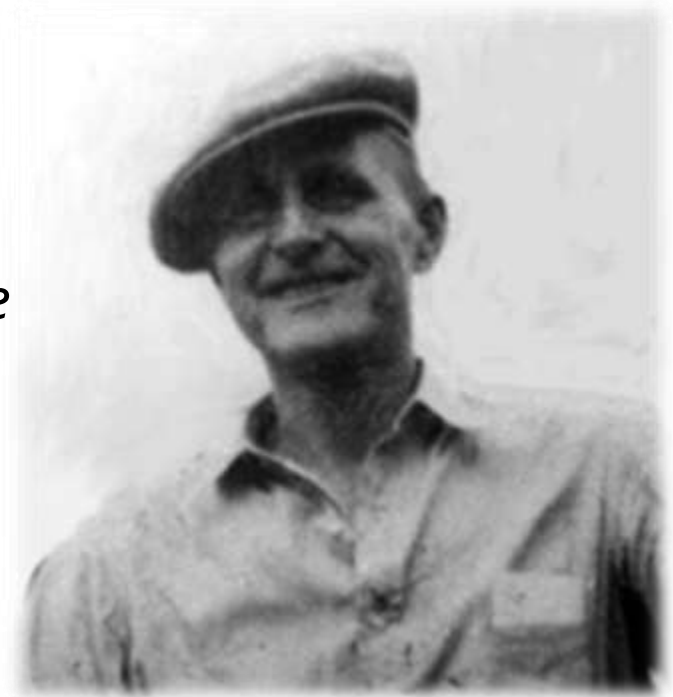
- Told schedule full — no chance of an audience
- Goes anyway and signs the appointment ledger
- At the end of the first interview, Fred is told the Master will receive him next. He is stunned:
 - *"Why, I nearly wilted. I wasn't ready. I hadn't expected to be called until the very last thing. I had to go, and it was a strange feeling in my heart and wondering what would happen next."*

First Audience with the Master

- After first asking after Fred's health, 'Abdu'l-Bahá asks about his trip to Green Acre, requesting specifics. Fred tries to avoid the subject, but the Master won't let it go. Fred figures He already knows so he'd better tell the truth.
- *Mahmud's Diary* relates: "He explained everything about his journey to the Master, who then told him, '*You are my guest.*'"

First Audience with the Master

*"... a wondrous light seemed to pour out. It was the light of love and I felt relieved and very much happier. He gave me much fruit, and **kissed the dirty hat I wore**, which had become soiled on my trip to see Him."*



Feeding the Hungry — Spiritually & Physically

- Penoyer writes:
 - “Fred often spoke of the great amount of fruit ‘Abdu’l-Bahá gave him during their conversation. As soon as he finished one piece, he was given another. He would later say he had never eaten so much fruit in one day. Interestingly, the day before Fred’s arrival at Green Acre, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá asked one of His interpreters to buy a basket of fruit, as **he was expecting a special guest** to arrive the next day.”



'Abdu'l-Bahá Visits Green Acre



Goodbye Becomes Hello

- Fred joins the others seeing the Master off the next morning.
- As the Master's car is passing, it stops suddenly and **the Master pulls him in and invites Fred to spend the week with Him in Malden, Massachusetts,** the next stop on His itinerary.

A Strong Bond Develops

- Penoyer says,
 - “Unfortunately, what transpired between them during this time is unknown. What is known, however, is **that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Fred became close friends for the remainder of their lives.** ‘Abdu’l-Bahá often referred to Fred as *“my son.”* Such an appellation was very rare for ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to make. They met again briefly a few weeks later, when **‘Abdu’l-Bahá, on His way to Chicago, requested a detour to Minneapolis. This was unusual in that there was only a small Bahá’í community there at the time.** Fred, Albert Hall, and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá spent the day together, the last time they would meet in person.”

'Abdu'l-Bahá in St. Paul, MN

Fred Mortensen

Albert Hall



Spiritual Transformation

- Fred Mortensen's life is forever changed after this experience; he writes:

- *"These events are engraved upon the tablet of my heart and I love every moment of them.*

The words of Bahá'u'lláh are my food, my drink, and my life. I have no other aim than to be of service to His Pathway and to be obedient to His Covenant."

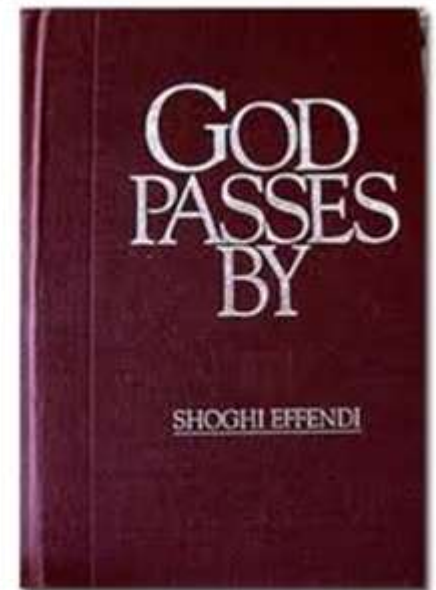


Never to Be Forgotten

- A year later, a letter from 'Abdu'l-Bahá prophesies,
 - *"That trip of thine from Minneapolis to Green Acre will never be forgotten. Its mention will be recorded eternally in books and works of history."*

Never to Be Forgotten

- Thirty-two years later, Shoghi Effendi writes in *God Passes By*:
 - *"A survey, however inadequate of the varied and immense activities of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in His tour of Europe and America cannot leave without mention some of the strange incidents that would often accompany personal contact with Him. The bold determination of a certain indomitable youth who, fearing 'Abdu'l-Bahá would not be able to visit the Western states, and unable himself to pay for a train journey to New England, had traveled all the way from Minneapolis to Maine lying on the rods between the wheels of a train . . . "*



Never to Be Forgotten

- His story is now also included in:
 - Alan Ward's *239 Days*
 - H. M. Balyuzi's *'Abdu'l-Bahá — The Centre of the Covenant*
 - *Star of the West* Volumes VI & IX & XIV
 - *The Bahá'í World*, Volumes X & XI
 - *Mahmud's Diary*
 - and on a website dedicated to him which includes the thesis of his great-grandson, Justin Charles Martin Penoyer

The Green-Eyed Monster

- **Jealousy** raises its ugly head amidst the believers, beginning at Green Acre when that **“filthy, horrid man”** as someone so rudely refers to him, receives that special, unscheduled audience with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. More incidents feed the green-eyed monster lurking within the Bahá’í community, like his invitation to spend the week with the Master in Malden, and moreso when ‘Abdu’l-Bahá refers to Fred Mortensen as **His “son.”**

Active and Dedicated Service

- Fred moves to the South to work for racial amity.
- He uses his natural leadership skills to organize numerous successful proclamation events for teaching the Faith, bringing in many excellent speakers.



Louis Gregory takes to calling him
“Frederick the Great.”

Mixed Emotions

- Thinking of his mother, Fred had mixed emotions, sad for what he put her through yet happy that her hopes for him finally came true. He wrote:



"My dear mother had done everything in her power to make me a good boy. I have but the deepest love for her and my heart has often been sad when thinking how she must have worried for my safety as well as for my future well-being. Through it all and in a most wonderful way, with a god-like patience, she hoped and prayed that her boy would find the road which leadeth to righteousness and happiness."

The Green-Eyed Monster Grows

- The American Bahá'í Community wishes to send funds to the Holy Land to assist with 'Abdu'l-Bahá's humanitarian work.
- The Master, unsure if a trip to the Holy Land can be accomplished, due to the war, allows them to make the attempt.
- However, He refuses to approve the person selected by the Bahá'í Temple Unity to make the trip, insists that **He will only permit the effort if Fred Mortensen serves as the representative.**
- This **exacerbates the already intense ill-will of the Baha'is towards Fred**, they *mistakenly assuming naivety on the part of the Master*, thinking He just doesn't understand what **"these people"** are like.
- Fred's ship, as the Master had feared, is turned back. The journey cannot be completed and monies are not delivered.

Fred Publicizes the Faith

- Fred moves as a homefront pioneer to Montana where he personally finances publicity and publishes many articles about the Faith in local newspapers. According to Penoyer's thesis,
 - "In one instance, he **felt obliged to correct an article** printed in the *Montana Record Herald*, which gave credit for the conception of the League of Nations to an unspecified king of France. Encouraged by friends in Helena, he wrote a letter to the paper in which he clearly stated that Bahá'u'lláh, founder of the Bahá'í faith, had revealed the basic principles of the League at least fifty years before it was established; furthermore, these same principles were explained by His son 'Abdu'l-Bahá in a book titled *The Secret of the Divine Civilization*, written in 1875. A few years later, Fred wrote an essay titled "The Three Great Lights," in which he eloquently described the nature of progressive revelation. This essay was published in the March 1925 edition of the *Star of the West*."

Blessings

- In 1922 Fred meets and marries Kathryn May Rubeck, happy to welcome her infant son as his own, especially because he'd given up hope of ever having children.
- But they have four more children together, in rapid succession, and he remembers that the Master once told him he would receive **"four blessings."** These children, he believes, are those blessings.



Another Transition

- After their home in Helena, Montana burns down (caused by earthquake in 1925) the Mortensens move to Chicago to be near the House of Worship.



Another Transition

In Chicago, Mortensen

- Remains an active believer
- Works nights at the Chicago Tribune
- Devotes the majority of his time to his family

Family Man

- Penoyer relates:
 - “Every night he went over his children’s homework, and he made sure they were well fed and properly clothed.

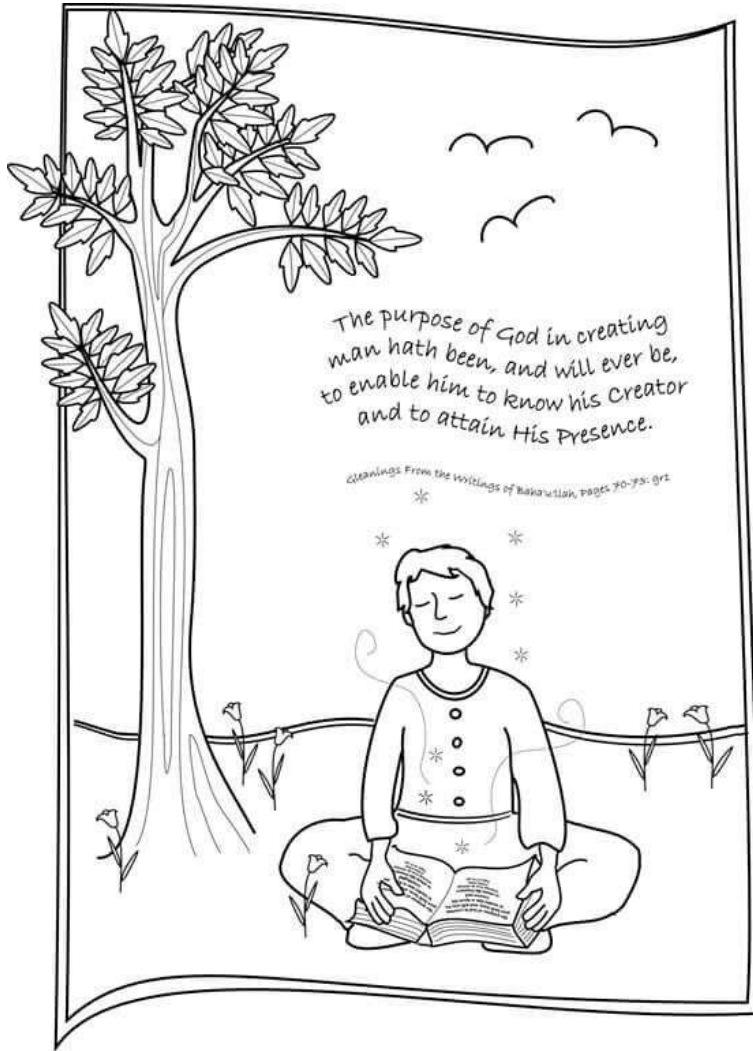


Family Man

- In addition to their school studies, he was very involved in their sports activities and other interests;



Family Man



- and, most important, he taught them the words of Bahá'u'lláh, stressing the importance of love in all facets of society. His children all became dedicated Baha'is.

Family Man

- According to Penoyer,
 - “His daughter, Kathryn, remembers him as
 - ‘a standard of fatherhood’
 - whom she viewed as a saint.’



Interests & Activities



- Active in YMCA
- Boxing
- Swimming
- Skating
- Baseball
- Handball
- Forming Unions
 - Fought for
 - Age limitations
 - Minimum Wage
 - Safer Working Conditions

Giving Credit Where Credit is Due

- All the wonderful things that happened to Fred, and that he in turn, did for family, society and within the Bahá'í community, he credits to a spiritual transformation:
 - *"...the Word of God gave me a new birth, made me a living soul, a revived spirit. I am positive that nothing else upon the earth could have changed my character as it has been changed. I am indeed a new being, changed by the power of the Holy Spirit...I have been resurrected and made live in the Kingdom of Al Abhá."*

Pioneer Effort

- 1946 - End of World War II; children grown, Fred wishes to serve the Faith abroad
- Writes to Shoghi Effendi requesting permission to pioneer to Germany
- Guardian suggests Austria instead
- Fred makes plans to go
- Shortly before departure date, falls seriously ill
- Dies on June 13th, of a cerebral hemorrhage, just a few months after he was to travel to Austria

Condolences from the Holy Land

- On learning of Fred's death, the Guardian cables the family:



- "Grieve passing beloved Fred. Welcome assured in Abhá Kingdom by Master. Praying progress his soul. His name is forever inscribed Bahá'í history."

Funeral

- Buried at Cedar Park Cemetery, Chicago, IL



Funeral

Per Fred's request,
his autobiographical account,
When a Soul Meets the Master
was read at the service

A Daughter's Tribute

- His obituary in the "In Memoriam" section of the *Bahá'í World*, Vol. XI, quotes his daughter, Mrs. Kathryn Mortensen Penoyer:
 - "My father lived and practiced the Bahá'í Religion to a degree beyond possible explanation . . . On the very eve before his death he spent his last time teaching the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh. His devotion cannot be measured in mere words, they are not powerful enough."



Power of Faith to Change a Life

- Penoyer sums up his thesis:
 - “Fred Mortensen’s background was that of a rogue and thief. Fred was not an advantaged person, and as such would not be a likely candidate to understand, let alone embrace, a new religion. He lived his beliefs without benefit of wealth or education, much like his mentor, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. **He was so moved by his exposure to Bahá'í teachings that the direction of his life changed instantly. The facts suggest a metamorphosis on a level other than scholarly.**



Power of Faith to Change a Life

- “Fred’s story is well known in Bahá’í history. The documentation is the result of his example of faith in action, not of his material accomplishments. **Fred perceived a truth more impressive than that of his grinding poverty, more real than his material needs, and more important than his immediate gratification. He is an example of one who learned that material things are transient, while inspiration and faith survive.**



Power of Faith to Change a Life

SUCH IS THE POWER OF FAITH TO CHANGE A LIFE.

