

A Brief Sketch of the Life of Hugh Chance, thirty-year member of the first Universal House of Justice

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Hugh Chance was born in Winfield, KS on 28 December 1911. The next year the family moved to a farm near Tisdale, just six miles east. There he lived the life of a typical farm boy for the next ten years. In 1922 the family moved to Davenport, IA so his father could attend Palmer Chiropractic College, the only one in the country at that time.

His mother had received chiropractic treatment despite strong social and family pressure that chiropractic practitioners were quacks. In a family argument, his father finally exclaimed, "If it can stop my headaches, I'll take their damn course!" After just one session, the headaches that had plagued him for years were gone. True to his word, Hugh's father packed up the family and moved to Davenport and enrolled. That decision changed Hugh's life.

After high school Hugh Chance attended Cornell College then law school at the University of Iowa. He obtained his Juris Doctors degree in 1934. Just before graduation that year, he married Margaret Chamberlain, a school teacher he had met in college. He then opened his own law practice while she taught school.

The depression had not receded enough for his law practice to prosper. In 1943 he enlisted in the US navy. His father's parting words were, "If you're ever in Australia, look up the Boltons." Stanley and Mariette Bolton were the only chiropractors in that country and he had attended school with them.

Hugh was assigned to the South Pacific, was in Australia and did look them up. In the Boltons home he noticed an unusual inscription on the wall. When he asked what it was, they said, "Bahá'í." They briefly discussed the Faith, gave him some pamphlets which he later read and dismissed, but he did send them home to his wife.

After his enlistment ended he was offered the position of attorney for the International Association of Chiropractic. In those days chiropractors were sued by local doctors for practicing medicine without a license or malpractice. His role was to travel and advise local attorneys in their defense of the chiropractors. He eventually became CEO of the Association.

In April 1953 Boltons came to the US for the dedication of the House of Worship and to attend the international teaching conference. They stayed as guests of the Chances. Margaret asked if they were Bahá'ís. When Boltons left they put Chances in touch with local Bahá'ís.

Margaret and Mary Ann, their daughter, investigated the Faith and both soon decided to join. It took Hugh another year. He had taken Margaret and Mary Ann to a conference for "Bahá'ís only" then sat in the back by himself. The words of the speaker convinced him that the Faith was true. After the session he spoke to the speaker and expressed his intention to declare his faith. The speaker had not expected this result!

A few months later, delegates were elected for the National Convention and Hugh was surprised to be elected. Soon after that next Riḍván he was appointed to the National Teaching Committee.

In 1961, in a bi-election, to fill a vacancy on the National Spiritual Assembly, Hugh was surprised to be elected. He was re-elected at the next Riḍván, then elected Secretary. The previous Secretary had just been elected to the International Bahá'í Council in Haifa, the precursor to the Universal House of Justice. As they parted, Charles Wolcott remarked, "You'll be in Haifa some day." Hugh did not think so.

Two years later, as a member of the National Spiritual Assembly, Hugh was in Haifa to elect the first Universal House of Justice. As the first six names of the members of this new institution were called out Hugh noted that he knew them. When the seventh name was called he thought, "That must be some other Hugh Chance!" The person sitting beside him later said that, as his name was called, all the color drained from his face. Never in his life had he imagined being a member of the House of Justice. It was unbelievable.

God took a Chance.

His first thought was that it was impossible to accept the position. They still had a home in Davenport, they had not sold it thinking their time in Wilmette would be brief, and Margaret's mother was elderly and needed their care. He would have to resign. But first the nine members had to decide what to do. The World Congress in London was just a couple days away and the nine didn't even know where in Haifa they might be able to meet to consult. Where was a room they could use? Was there a room with nine chairs? What were they going to do?

The nine were told that there was a room at Bahji with nine chairs, so they met there. All had planned on going to London for the World Congress, so they decided to meet again in London. In the next few days, before Hugh could resign from the House of Justice, his wife's mother died and the house in Davenport was sold. The obstacles to service had been removed. The next thirty years of his service on the House of Justice are history.

In that time, the number of National Spiritual Assemblies increased from 56 to 165. The Seat of the House of Justice was designed, constructed and occupied. Plans were drawn up for four more buildings on the Arc surrounding the Seat as well as those for the terraces above and below the Shrine of the Báb

The constitution of the House of Justice was written and adopted. Bahá'u'lláh's Most Holy Book of Laws was translated into English and published, as well as three additional compilations of scripture. And the Second Bahá'í World Congress was held in New York City. The Cause of God had been transformed.

In the late 1980s, the Spiritual Assembly of Winfield, Kansas invited the Chances to retire there. They accepted and moved in 1993, becoming active members of that Bahá'í community, even serving on the local Assembly. It was a great change from Haifa and a challenge.

They became involved, to the extent physically possible, in local and national Bahá'í activities: speaking at Louhelen Bahá'í School, attending electoral unit conventions and other events. A stroke resulted in partial paralysis, but he continued to be as active as possible. While walking the paralysis would become

noticeable if he was tired. At those times Margaret would remark, "You're listing dear," and he would straighten his posture. But he did not stop.

It was not long though that declining health forced a severe reduction of their activities. Margaret died in 1996. The next year Hugh insisted in participating in the Kansas Bahá'í centennial, despite a broken collar bone. His daughter came from Australia to help him. The 136 mile trip from Winfield to Enterprise, KS took over three hours, driving slowly to minimize his pain. It would have been reasonable not to attend, but he was determined. At the celebration he joined the other special guest, Dr. David Ruhe, also retired from the House of Justice and former member of the Kansas Bahá'í community. The two Kansas members of the House of Justice had not seen each other since both had retired and left Haifa in 1993. It was Hugh's last public event. He died the next year.

Hugh and Margaret Chance are buried in Tisdale Cemetery, to the left of the north entrance, near the front, just a few miles from his boyhood farm east of Winfield, Kansas. Bahá'u'lláh had taken a Chance* to build up the Cause of God, then welcomed him back home.

Duane L. Herrmann, personal interviews, November 1994.

*Hugh and Margaret were delighted with a poem titled: "God Took a Chance," about his life and displayed it in their home.