



Effie Baker (seated centre front) with a group of Bahá'í friends from other countries, when she visited Israel in March 1925 for pilgrimage.



Dellaram Vreeland at the observatory with the telescope invented by Effie's grandfather.

Faith in the stars

Dellaram Vreeland has been a Baha'i her whole life, but it was only recently she discovered the significant connection between her hometown of Ballarat and her faith. Pictures from the **Australian Bahá'í National Archives, Ballarat Observatory Historical Collection and Justin Whitelock.**

HISTORY lives within Ballarat's every nook and cranny. It's an undeniable fact. Which is why it shouldn't have come as a surprise when I discovered the strong historic link that existed between my hometown and my religion - the Baha'i Faith.

The Baha'i Faith, which has more than five million adherents worldwide, is a religion that originated in Persia (now Iran) 170 years ago, yet our gold rush town played an integral role in its history.

Even though the Australian Baha'i community now has more than 17,000 Baha'is, the very first Australian Baha'i woman was raised right here in Ballarat.

Her name was Euphemia (Effie) Eleanor Baker. She was born in Goldsborough on March 25, 1880 and was sent to live in Ballarat at the observatory with her grandparents when

she was six years old.

Her grandfather, Henry Evans Baker, was the first superintendent at the Ballarat Observatory and his renowned 26-inch Great Equatorial Telescope, aptly named The Baker, is currently housed there and still in use today.

Captain Baker built a workshop and foundry at the observatory, and constructed a number of telescopes on site. His influence on Effie's life was profound.

Ballarat Municipal Observatory and Museum science and education officer Saeed Salimpour, who will be presenting a paper about Captain Baker at the National Australian Convention of Amateur Astronomers next month, said the astronomer was regarded in Australia as a pioneer in his field.

"The captain's story is amazing. He was 71-years-old

when he built the huge telescope without any formal education, but he had the intuition, the determination and the passion to go ahead and accomplish something like that," Mr Salimpour said.

"A lot of amateur astronomers around the world do influence the progress of astronomy and he was one of them. The skills he had were unmatched at that point and in that time in the late 1800s."

Captain Baker imbued in his young grand daughter a lifelong intrigue in scientific instruments and this intrigue lead her to become one of the Baha'i Faith's most-loved and famous photographers.

Mr Salimpour said Effie would have been greatly influenced by her grandfather, having lived with the captain for much of her life.

"She used to spend a lot of time with him, especially

because Captain Baker had those skills I'm pretty sure he would've educated her in science and mechanical stuff," he said.

Having attended Clarendon School, Mount Pleasant State School and Grenville College, Effie was immersed in art from a young age.

Studying music under locally renowned pianist Edgar Nicolas, in 1892 she won second and third prizes for her piano performances at the Royal South Street Eisteddfod.

During her later years, she studied visual art at the Ballarat East School of Art where she received her grounding in colour and composition at the Ballarat Fine Art Gallery's school.

With a passion for photography, she used her talents to take photos in and around Ballarat as she honed her skill - a skill that would serve her and her soon-to-be adopted faith very well.

By the time Effie discovered the Baha'i Faith, she was mature both personally and professionally and had established herself as a successful freelance artisan.

She first heard of the religion in 1922 after two newly-arrived Baha'is - Clara and Hyde Dunn - spoke about their faith at a meeting in Melbourne.

Captivated by the faith's emphasis on the need for world

unity, interfaith understanding and equality between sexes, she declared herself a Baha'i in that same year.

Effie's loyalty and servitude made her an outstanding Baha'i. As a photographer, she served her beloved religion by taking photos of some of the faith's most holy places, both in Israel and in Iran.

Her venture to Iran in 1930 was undertaken during a time when westerners, particularly women, received little protection in the Middle East and also during a period when Baha'is were continuously persecuted, as they are today. Effie had to risk her safety in order to travel there, capturing photos of sites and buildings related to the history of the faith.

For eight months, often dressed in a black cloak (chador) in accordance with local custom, she moved in secret between locations, keeping her western identity and treasured camera equipment well hidden in case she was suspected for being a spy and arrested.

With limited photographic resources, Effie's technical abilities were greatly tested. Without a darkroom or running water, she would be forced to develop her film under the moonlight, ensuring her work was satisfactory prior to leaving each location. Some of the sacred sites she photographed would soon be nothing more than dust on Iran's soil, but thanks to this courageous woman and her skills, they would remain forever alive through her photography.

Effie Baker died in January of 1968 after a lifetime of service. She was a humble photographer from regional Ballarat who played an integral role in the historical preservation of a global faith, placing her life in danger for the sake of what she believed was a worthy cause.

Effie was the first Ballarat woman to call herself a Baha'i, but today there are many more living here.

Baha'is are the followers of Baha'u'llah who they believe was sent from God to guide humanity towards its spiritual and material maturity.

I was raised in a Baha'i family who lost everything in Iran and fled more than

30 years ago in fear of living in persecution.

My mother and father left prior to the 1979 Islamic revolution, securing visas to Spain and Bangladesh respectively, before arriving in Australia with one ardent desire - to live in peace and practise their beliefs freely.

After meeting in Melbourne, marrying and having three children, they left for Ballarat where they continued to live a life free from religious prejudice and hate.

Since the 1950s, the Ballarat Baha'i community has been doing its bit to work towards the betterment of its community.

The Baha'is run regular activities for children, youth and adults aimed towards spiritual and community development for people of all faith and cultural backgrounds.

As they continue serving their neighbourhoods, along with other like-minded individuals and organisations, I am reminded of the fact that my hometown has a strong connection with the faith I love.

Ballarat has played an integral role in raising several notable Australians, including Alfred Deakin, Sir Robert Menzies, Peter Lalor and Steve Moneghetti to name a few. In the lead up to Effie Baker's birthday next week, I'd like to nominate her for inclusion on that list.

10 principles Baha'is believe in:

- One God
- The Oneness of Humankind
- Independent Investigation of truth
- The essential harmony of science and religion
- Equality of men and women
- Elimination of all kinds of prejudice
- Universal compulsory education
- Spiritual solution to economic problems
- A universal auxiliary language
- Recognising world peace as an urgent need for our time



Effie Baker (top right) in Israel, March 1925, with Bahá'í friends during her pilgrimage.



Henry Baker (top right) pictured with his grand-daughter Effie Baker (bottom left) as well as William Baker (middle) and Conrade Quilhampton (bottom right).