



## Jim Loft and the Man on the Train

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JIM LOFT WOULD NEVER meet ‘Abdu’l-Bahá personally, nor would he play a role in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s travels across North America in 1912. Yet Jim would experience, and recount throughout his life, one of the unique tales about that historic journey.

On the afternoon of September 9, 1912, four-year-old James Loft — or “Jim” as he liked to be called — sat on a fence just outside of Oshawa, Ontario, alongside the railroad tracks. Five hours earlier, a train had left Montreal, beginning its fourteen-hour journey to Buffalo. It had stopped in Brockville near the Thousand Islands about 10:30 a.m., and was now making its way west along the north shore of Lake Ontario.

At about 3:30 p.m. near the town of Oshawa, Jim watched the train hurtle by. Through one of its windows he saw something that so overwhelmed him that he fell backwards off the fence and onto the grass below. He described what he saw as “a man wearing a long flowing white robe waving from the train.” Later in life he would explain that this was his earliest surviving memory.

Jim Loft was born on July 13, 1908. His ancestral home was the Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory but he grew up in Oshawa, Ontario. His father, Newton Loft, lost his leg in a train accident when Jim was just a young boy. The family would camp at the side of the road where his father made and sold wicker chairs. But chair sales couldn’t support the family. Jim went to work at the age of twelve, claiming to be fifteen so he could earn a legal wage.

Jim was greatly affected by the prejudice he encountered growing up an aboriginal in rural Canada. Years later, his daughter, Evelyn, wrote: “He knew he was Indian. But not the kind he was called by ignorant people. . . . He said it just wasn’t from children or his peers. It came from so-called religious ladies.” Though submerged in a society that had little regard for him, Jim believed from childhood that racial equality was a just principle, and he later noted that he felt a strong pull to spiritual matters. During his difficult teen years, he would often ask God’s help to inspire him to help alleviate the poverty, oppression and alcoholism that plagued his people.

On October 23, 1931, Jim married Melba Whetung, who was raised on the Curve Lake Ojibwa First Nation. Like Jim, she had a keen interest in spiritual topics. It was Melba's friend Emma who first spoke to her about Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Melba was the first Canadian of Aboriginal descent to join the Bahá'í community in Canada, followed soon after by Jim. The vision from Jim's childhood soon became clear. "Now I know who that old man was," he said. "It was 'Abdu'l-Bahá when he was in this country." It had taken Jim Loft decades to make the connection.

In 1949, Jim and Melba settled on the Tyendinaga Reserve and dedicated themselves to serving and supporting the First Nations community. Despite grueling poverty, they were unswayed in their dedication. For Jim, the memory of the man in a flowing white robe waving to him from the train inspired him to his final day.

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### **FOOTNOTE / ENDNOTE:**

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### **BIBLIOGRAPHY:**

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