

## HERMAN VETTERLING, EARLY SANTA CRUZ BUDDHIST

*The Buddhist Ray*, a bimonthly newspaper, was published “in the Santa Cruz Mountains” from 1887 to 1894, years before there was widespread interest in Buddhism in the United States. The writer, editor, and publisher was a certain Philangi Dasa, who at one point was willing to sell photographs of his home in the mountains but who never told where it was.

In 2006 Marion Pokriots, a Santa Cruz genealogist and local historian, was researching the properties of the area known as Mount Roberta, a hill two miles north of Scotts Valley. She found that a hundred years ago there was an “eccentric” house with “quite a bit of blue glass and a Gothic window in the peak of the house. In the living room was a round window with sanskrit characters.” Memoirs of people who lived in the house or visited it mentioned that “the gulch and creek nearby were named Mahatma Gulch and creek by later owners, who thought a Hindu had lived there” (*The Valley Post*, Jan. 15, 2007)

The owner of the property in 1894, Marion discovered, was Herman Vetterling. When she asked me if this name meant anything to me, I replied that it certainly did, for Philangi Dasa. I knew, was the pen name Herman Vetterling used for the *The Buddhist Ray* and for a book he had published in 1887. We had found the hitherto unknown location of Philangi Dasa’s activities and we had opened a chapter in the life of Herman Vetterling, whose unusual spiritual development was known to scholars of the history of religion in America. Our research eventually led to my writing a monograph on the life of Herman Vetterling which can be found on <http://www.shs.psr.edu/library/VetterlingArticle.asp>. The present article excerpts from it the details about his life and activities which relate to Santa Cruz County. The sources for these details are stated in the monograph, which also has a bibliography and photos of the house on Mt. Roberta and the symbolic window.

Born in Sweden in 1849, Vetterling emigrated to Minnesota in 1871, turned away from his native Lutheranism, and in 1877 was ordained a Swedenborgian minister in Pennsylvania. (Emanuel Swedenborg, a Swedish scientist and mystic, did not found a church, but his followers did so, naming it the Church of the New Jerusalem, also called simply the New Church.) Leaving the ministry in 1881, Vetterling graduated from the homeopathic medical school of Hahnemann Hospital in Chicago in 1883, and spent some time in Chicago and some in St. Paul

There is evidence that Herman joined the Theosophical Society in 1884 while living in St. Paul. The society had been founded in 1875 in New York by Helena Blavatsky and Henry Steel Olcott. Its original position, as presented in Blavatsky's 1877 book *Isis Unveiled*, was that the source of all religions was in India, that wise men there who still preserved the ancient religious wisdom had mysterious powers, and that Blavatsky herself had learned this in her travels in India. Herman wrote

an 1884-1885 series of seven articles presenting Swedenborg's teaching in Helena Blavatsky and Henry Steel Olcott's periodical *The Theosophist*.

Vetterling's relationship with the Theosophical Society was a bridge between his Swedenborgianism and his Buddhism. Blavatsky and Olcott proffered explanations of the origin of the world and its hierarchy of spiritual beings from God down to man, a neo-platonic type of world structure that was found in some unorthodox Christian groups, in various other religious traditions in Western Asia, in Swedenborg, and in some Buddhist traditions. In his 1884 work, *Esoteric Buddhism*, the English Theosophist Alfred P. Sinnett claimed that the ancient body of religious knowledge that had been lost to the world in general had been preserved in Buddhism. Sinnett wrote, "This secret knowledge, in reality, long antedated the passage through earth-life of Gautama Buddha. Brahminical philosophy, in ages before Buddha, embodied the identical doctrine which may now be described as Esoteric Buddhism."

Herman Vetterling, having interpreted Swedenborg for Blavatsky and Olcott's followers, went on to proclaim that the Swedish mystic also agreed with Sinnett's notion of primitive Buddhism. Vetterling's book on this topic, *Swedenborg the Buddhist; or The Higher Swedenborgianism; Its Secrets; and Thibetan Origin*, was published in 1887 by the "Buddhistic Swedenborgian Brotherhood," in Los Angeles. His study bore the name, not of Herman Vetterling, but of a pseudonym, Philangi Dasa.

In *Swedenborg the Buddhist* Vetterling incorporated a great deal from Sinnett's *Esoteric Buddhism*. He accepted the thesis that the ancient wisdom had been transmitted through Hinduism to Buddhism but he added what seems to be an original analysis, that the ancient wisdom maintained by the Buddhist monks was the same as that which Swedenborg, in his dreams and visions, had learned to be a pre-Hebrew-Bible book that had been lost in all the world except in "Greater Tartary." Swedenborg's Greater Tartary consisted of Tibet, Mongolia, and the area between them.

Herman Vetterling's - Philangi Dasa's - view of the relationship between Swedenborg and Buddhism was well received by Theosophists, rejected by Swedenborgians, and accepted with interest by Japanese Buddhists.

By the time *Swedenborg the Buddhist* was published, its author was living in Santa Cruz County. Why he chose to live here is a mystery, although a clue to it might be the report in a Santa Cruz newspaper that "In Scott's Valley is a gentleman who is at present engaged in writing a work on 'Theosophy.'" In the city of Santa Cruz, according to the article, there was a Theosophical Society which had "Brahministic beliefs" based on Edwin Arnold's *Light of Asia* and Madame Blavatsky's works. At least there was in the Santa Cruz area a group of people who could be sympathetic to Vetterling. It was even rumored back east that he "attempted to establish some

kind of theosophical brotherhood in the country." Another view of his move is in one of the dreams of Philangi Dasa in *Swedenborg the Buddhist*: having heard about the Guardians of the Lost Word in the Himalayas, he traveled "through lone dales and along brant and craggy mountains, and through swift rivers and stormy lakes." Then, after a year of wandering, "I began one morning to walk toward a mountain. The foot-hills were beautiful; well shaded and watered. When I was got about ten miles, I found myself on a hill from which I could overlook a little dale that edged the foot of the mountain." Here he found the "little white marble temple" in which a long dialog, the main action of *Swedenborg the Buddhist*, takes place.

The Vetterling home on Mount Roberta, although far from being a white marble temple, was a substantial two-story structure which still stands. The house and twelve acres of land were legally bought in early 1886 not by Herman, but by his wife-to-be, Margaret Curry Pitcairn. Born in 1838 in Ohio, Margaret was a daughter of the Scottish born Robert Pitcairn, a prosperous merchant in western Ohio. When Robert died in Pittsburgh in 1855, his widow and children remained there. Another Pitcairn family, relatives of Robert's, became better known: not only did one son become an executive with the Pennsylvania Railroad, but another son was the co-founder of the Pittsburgh Plate Glass Company, and as such he was one of the industrial tycoons of Pittsburgh. Both Pitcairn families were members of the New Church.

While serving the New Church in Pittsburgh, Herman Vetterling had fallen in love with a young Pitcairn woman (not of the lineage of Robert). The young lady did not reciprocate his ardor, and it seems clear that his later sigh, "In our younger days we, too, wrote religious poetry. The inspiration came from a blue eyed maiden, -- who, by the way, later jilted us, thinking she could do better," referred to her. It happened, however, that Margaret C. Pitcairn, the young woman's aunt, ten years older than Herman, fixed her affections on him.

Although the property on Mt. Roberta was bought in Margaret's name, it was sold in 1894 by Margaret C. Vetterling and Herman C. Vetterling. Their marriage, which was not recorded in Santa Cruz County, took place in or about 1890 according to the U. S. Census of 1900.

The face Herman Vetterling presented to Santa Cruz is recorded in the *Santa Cruz Daily Surf* of October 18, 1887: "Dr. H. C. Vetterling of Glenwood has connected himself with Dr. W. S. Hall of this city.... Dr. Vetterling is a specialist on diseases of the eye and ear and Dr. Hall gives special attention to refractive difficulties of the eye." Available city guides enable one to trace Vetterling's medical practice in Santa Cruz only through 1889," and in 1893 he himself characterized his activities as "woodchopping, digging, hoeing, planting, printing, etc., etc."

The other face of Herman Vetterling, however, the face of Philangi Dasa, was recognized by the *Surf* on January 8, 1889, with the comment, "A prophet is not without honor save in his own country" --The Salinas *Index* pays this tribute to a Santa Cruz journal of which we have never heard: The Buddhist Ray, published at Santa Cruz and devoted to Buddhism in Swedenborg in particular, has completed the first year of its existence. It is an 8-page octavo, beautifully printed on thick tinted book paper, and ably edited. We wish the Ray another successful year."

The primary activity of woodchopper on Mt. Roberta was certainly the writing, editing, printing, and distributing of *The Buddhist Ray*. In the first issue, January, 1888, the as yet unnamed editor claimed, "we believe ours to be the first Buddhist baby born in Christendom." Whatever the correct understanding of this attribution may be, the importance of the launching of such a publication at that time has not escaped the attention of scholars of the history of Buddhism in the United States. Paul Carter in *The Spiritual Crisis of the Gilded Age*, Rick Fields in *How the Swans Came to the Lake: A narrative History of Buddhism in America*, and Thomas Tweed *The American Encounter with Buddhism, 1844-1912: Victorian culture and the limits of dissent* summarize the highlights of *The Buddhist Ray* in their works.

Here a few basic remarks seem in order. The message of *The Buddhist Ray* is grounded in the esoteric Buddhism of Sinnett, it incorporates the revelations of Swedenborg, and it looks like the Buddhism of Olcott. In its early issues the *Ray* showed sympathy for Theosophy, and until the end it persevered in showing respect for Henry Steel Olcott. By 1894, however, the editor had nothing but harsh criticism for Helena Blavatsky, and, as far as the doctrines of Theosophy are concerned, the editor proclaimed, "We have read all the publications of that society, including those of the Miracle Section, but have not found any hidden knowledge in them: rather, extracts from gentile and mediaeval books, plagiarisms, forgeries, hypnotic delusions, spiritualistic phenomena, and irish cock-and-bull stories."

The young *Ray* devoted much space to Vetterling's contention that Swedenborg was basically a Buddhist, but gradually it said less and less about that. From the beginning to the end of its course, it never tired of extolling the ancient roots of Buddhism and of jabbing at what the editor construed to be Christianity's doctrinal and moral inferiority to Buddhism. Here and there it would make some vitriolic comment about the Church of the New Jerusalem.

Articles from the *Ray* were disseminated in translation in Japan. Some other Buddhist communities, especially in Ceylon, subscribed in appreciable numbers. The journal also attracted financial support from Henry Steel Olcott, himself, who contributed three pounds sterling. Philangi Dasa was "made a member of the Advisory Committee of the Religious Congress to be held in Chicago in connection with the 1893 World's Fair." His views on Swedenborg even appeared as an article in a French review, *Le Lotus Bleu: Revue theosophique*.

*The Buddhist Ray* reveals clearly the sensitive and often bitter feelings of its editor, but contains little reference to his own person and life. At one point he announced the formation -- evidently under his guidance -- of the "Purana Silence Society" for women who were to take vows of chastity (including conjugal) and humility and were to stand up in public. The *Ray*, however, made no further mention of the group. In the sixth year of its publication it advertised 5x8 photos of its "home," but no copies have come to light in any local photo collection. Toward the end of its run the *Ray* took an interest in anti-vivisection, devoting one of the final issues to this topic. Here and there an article in the *Ray* would bear the name of Philangi Dasa, but it was not until the very last issue, November-December, 1894, that, in announcing the demise of the *Ray* he identified Dasa as editor. Only a year earlier the *Santa Cruz Surf* newspaper had reviewed the *Ray* favorably, acknowledging that the editor lived in the mountains, but declining to name him.

Lacking letters, diaries, or other personal records, one can only guess why the Vetterlings left the Santa Cruz area to move to San Jose. Presumably the opportunities for him as a homeopathic doctor were greater in the larger city. However that may be, I hazarded the opinion in the monograph that Herman felt the need to move away from his Buddhism as physically as he was moving away from it spiritually. During the seven years of *The Buddhist Ray* he had come to realize that what he had taken for Buddhism was the Olcott characterization of it. A serious scholar, he had learned that the origins of Buddhism lay not in the primitive revelation of the Himalayas, but in an evolution of Hinduism, and that Swedenborg's notion of ancient books maintained in Greater Tartary had no basis in fact. As Herman moved away from his Buddhism, so he moved away from the place which he felt to be identified with it.

The oldest record I could find that Herman and Margaret Vetterling had moved to San Jose is the 1900 U. S. Census. The San Jose city directories tell us that from 1901 to 1927 Herman's address was 527 McLaughlin Avenue, which is in East San Jose, about one hundred yards outside the San Jose city limits of that period, but well within the city now. From 1928 to 1931 he was living at 1114 Cook Street, close to the present San Jose airport. He was a physician from 1901 to 1907, a farmer from 1910 to 1916, and had no stated occupation in other years, although the 1920 U. S. Census listed him as a retired physician. Margaret Curry Vetterling, "Maggie," was mentioned as his wife in the directories for 1911-1912 through 1913-1914. She died in January, 1915, at the age, it seems, of 73. On January 28, 1915 Herman C. Vetterling filed a petition for probate of the will of Margaret C. Vetterling in the Superior Court of Santa Clara County. "The estate is valued at not more than \$10,000."

In addition to his domestic activities in San Jose, Herman attended to the building of an animal shelter and the founding of the Santa Clara Humane Society. In 1928

he "commenced the erection of an animal shelter in Willow Glen [south of downtown San Jose]." Work was halted by action of the city, but he "later built another shelter, on which he spent more than \$50,000, on the Stevens Creek road east of the Winchester road [west of downtown]. It has been in disuse for some time." In 1928 he resigned from the Santa Clara County Humane Society "because of differences over the terms of a gift of a \$50,000 animal shelter."

Vetterling's principal accomplishment during his San Jose years was the writing and publishing of *The Illuminate of Goerlitz or Jakob Boehme's (1575-1624) Life and Philosophy: A Comparative Study*. This massive tome of 1500 pages went back beyond Blavatsky, beyond Swedenborg, to Jakob (Jacob) Boehme, a Protestant Christian mystic, an untutored shoemaker who felt inspired by God to write many volumes about the Christian faith. The term *Theosophist* was coined to refer to him, two centuries before Madame Blavatsky and Henry Steele Olcott began to use the term to describe their doctrines, which were quite different from his. In Boehme Vetterling saw human spirituality in its finest, deepest, simplest form, which predated Hindus, Buddhists, Christians, Swedenborgians, Spiritualists, and Theosophists and yet lived on in the midst of all these imperfect forms.

Herman C. Vetterling died in his home in San Jose on September 5, 1931, at 82 years of age. The long, front page *San Jose Mercury Herald* article which appeared the next day did not mention the New Church, Theosophy, Buddhism, or Philangi Dasa. It told about his benefactions to animals and it stated that he was a physician, but above all, it described him as the author of *The Illuminant of Gorlitz [sic]*, and the title proclaimed in large letters, "SAN JOSE WRITER OF PHILOSOPHY CALLED BY DEATH." In Santa Cruz he was at least remembered with a short newspaper article in the *Santa Cruz News*, which reported that he had edited the *Buddhist Ray* in Santa Cruz in the 1890s, although it did not mention that he had done this under a pseudonym.

The name of Herman Vetterling was never lost among scholars of Jacob Boehme, and it has recently become known to students of the history of American Buddhism. Herman Vetterling belongs on the list of notable Santa Cruz persons .