

# Edwin T. Brigham

Social Activist  
1874-1950

by Jeremy Drouin

In October 1894 in the midst of a nationwide depression, Edwin Brigham, a 20-year old printer from Kirksville, Missouri, stepped off a train in Kansas City hoping to find work. Little did he know that this would mark the beginning of a 52-year career in social service helping thousands of homeless men and women in Kansas City.

Edwin Terry Brigham, "Terry" to his close friends, was born on February 12, 1874. He was the fourth of seven children born to Theodore Brigham and Sarah Frances Terry, both of whom instilled in their children Christian values and a devotion to charitable work. Edwin learned the printing trade in Kirksville, Missouri, but greater opportunity for employment brought him to Kansas City in 1894. There he found temporary work with the Charles J. Brown Printing Company and shortly thereafter a permanent job as a typesetter for the *Daily Drovers' Telegram*.

Edwin spent his evenings volunteering at the Helping Hand Institute. Housed in a former saloon at 4<sup>th</sup> and Main, the Institute provided food, lodging, and work for homeless and destitute men on the city's North End. The organization was established in September 1894 by a Methodist minister, The Reverend Banner E. Shawhan, whom Brigham had first met in Kirksville and contacted upon his arrival in Kansas City.

Edwin found his true calling while volunteering at Helping Hand. He managed a small print shop in the basement of the Institute and was later given the title of assistant superintendent. In his new position, Brigham was charged with soliciting contributions from local business professionals; he set a personal goal of meeting with at least ten people per day, sharing the mission of Helping Hand. One of his early pledges was from William Volker, a picture frame wholesaler who would become one of Kansas City's most highly regarded businessmen and philanthropists. The two men formed a close relationship, and Edwin would call on his friend throughout the years for financial support of the organization.



In 1898, Brigham was appointed superintendent after The Rev. Mr. Shawhan unexpectedly left Kansas City. That same year he married Bessie May Sheets of Paris, Illinois. Like Edwin, Bessie had devoted her life to helping others. She moved to Kansas City in 1897 after reading about the work of Helping Hand in a newspaper. She would serve with her husband for over 20 years as assistant superintendent of the organization and also helped form the Council of Social Agencies. Under the Brighams' leadership, Helping Hand grew to become one of the largest missions of its kind in Kansas City.

Edwin Brigham remained superintendent of Helping Hand until his death from a heart attack on July 5, 1950. Bessie May Brigham had died four years earlier. The Brighams left behind two sons, Ralph and Lawrence, as well as a legacy of generosity and service towards Kansas City's homeless. The Helping Hand Institute consolidated with Goodwill Industries of Greater Kansas City, Inc. in 1978 and later reorganized as The Helping Hand of Goodwill Industries.

### Sources

"100 Years of Excellence: The Helping Hand Institute of Goodwill Industries." *The Kansas City Star*, 4 Dec 1994, Special Section.

"As a Good Samaritan." *Responsibility* 3 (Nov. 1925): 2-3, 10.

"Candid Shots: Edwin T. Brigham." *Kansas City Journal Post*, 16 Feb. 1938, 15.

"E. Terry Brigham Dies." *The Kansas City Times*, 6 July 1950, 3.

"Gives Her Year's Work to Charity." *The Kansas City Times*, 10 Sept. 1932.

Helping Hand Institute. *New Lives for Old: Helping Others to Help Themselves*. Kansas City: The Helping Hand Institute, 1952.

Schauffler, Edward R. "A Little Man Casts a Long Shadow in Lifetime Service to Helping Hand." *The Kansas City Times*, 11 June 1947, 22.

© 2008

Photos: Courtesy of Judith Brigham Bethel