



Shenandoah Mennonite Historian

Volume 25, No. 3
Summer, 2017

Published by the Shenandoah Valley Mennonite Historians
Elwood E. Yoder, Editor

A quarterly periodical dedicated to the history and culture of Mennonites in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, USA

Daniel M. Smucker, Jr. and Frances Yoder Smucker

Gary Smucker has written a feature article about his parents, Dan and Frances Smucker. You will find this an encouraging story of a pastor, a businessman, and his wife who supported his ministry and work in every way.

Gary Smucker lived in Harrisonburg for twenty-two years, 1945-1967. He is a retired teacher who lives in Alexandria, Virginia.

Thank you Gary for your article.

Please mark November 11, 2017, 9:30 AM, on your calendar for the Shenandoah Valley Mennonite Historians Annual Meeting. The meeting will take place at Village Hall at Virginia Mennonite Retirement Community.

Timothy and Ruth Jost will talk about their Mennonite Heritage tour to Poland in 2015. The Josts visited cities and villages where Timothy's ancestors lived for 200 years from the 16th to 18th century, including seeing the oldest Mennonite church building in the world.

Ridgeway Mennonite Church (above), in 2012.
Photo from Jennifer Bolander



Frances (1916-1999) and Dan (1917-2008) Smucker, in the 1960s.
Photo from Gary Smucker

IN THIS ISSUE:

- DANIEL M. SMUCKER, JR. AND FRANCES YODER SMUCKER: PASTORING, BUSINESS OWNERS, AND FARMING, BY GARY SMUCKER
- PHOTOS OF DAN AND FRANCES SMUCKER

Daniel M. Smucker, Jr. and Frances Yoder Smucker

by Gary Smucker

Dan and Frances Yoder Smucker were kept busy. They were a pastoral couple in a young church, parents, homemakers, special child care providers, business people, and a farm couple among many other tasks they felt to be their calling.

A typical week for Dan was to work in Dan's Body Service from 7 AM to 5 PM Monday to Friday and 7 AM to noon on Saturday. Until his son was old enough to do it, he milked the cow before work. As necessary Dan took time off to do his pastoring work or farm work. Wednesday night found him and Frances at the 7 PM "Prayer Meeting" at Ridgeway Mennonite Church. Saturday after Dan finished work at 12 noon, the family would go to Red Front Supermarket or Mick or Mack Grocery to buy food and supplies for the week. Saturday evening Dad put the final touches on Sunday's sermon outline that had been 'stewing' in his mind during the week.



Frances and Dan Smucker 1942 wedding photo.

Photo from Gary Smucker

On Sunday the family drove to Ridgeway Church, picking up people on the way to take to church. People crowded into the car and children sat on adults' laps, and the small ones

stood behind the front seat. During Sunday School, starting at 10 AM, Dan and Frances usually both taught classes. Then beginning at 11 AM after scripture reading and singing

Dan preached the weekly sermon. At Sunday dinner there were often guests, or occasionally the Smucker family would be invited to the home of another family. Sunday after a noon dinner was the time to relax, nap, and often visit Dan's parents nearby. Sunday evening at Ridgeway Church there was another church service and many times another sermon.

Frances had an equally busy week. Preparing three meals a day, child care including handicapped children, laundry, house cleaning, women's church group meetings, and gardening are only the beginning of a list of her tasks every week. Frances as the pastor's wife did many things to help in Dan's work. It was her nature also to minister to the people in Ridgeway Church and to support the success of Dan's business.

In addition to their 'normal' week there were times that called for extra effort. Dan felt the call to go to other locations to have revival meetings. In the format of the 1950s and '60s revivals, that often meant traveling to another location for a week, or often two weeks, to preach every night in a church and invite members of the audience to become Christians and join that church. Dan had to prepare up to eight sermons for a week. Of course, he reused the outlines from earlier sermons, but he liked to prepare to keep the message fresh and interesting. One summer he held revival meetings in thirteen different locations.

So you can imagine what the mission of Frances was for the weeks that Dan was away. She had to pick up the farm work Dan normally did, answer calls from people in Ridgeway Church, and do all the work of shopping and taking the children to school and appointments. Frances did this with a glad heart, enthusiastically sharing the information about Dan's work miles away, and never complaining about what she had to do. The



Clockwise from left: Jean, Gary, Frances, Karen, Helen Jo, and Dan Smucker, 1962.

Photo from Gary Smucker

children never remember her complaining about her responsibilities. In fact, it was the opposite. Frances got the children involved in prayers for their father's work and made them feel excited about what their dad did.

Tom Brokaw called Americans who matured in the Depression and served in the 1940s the "greatest generation."¹ Dan and Frances Yoder Smucker were a part of the Mennonite "greatest generation." Through nurture, training, and maybe even some genetic inheritance they followed an alternate path to the "greatest generation" outcomes. Many other people they knew did the same.

Tom Brokaw referred, of course, to the war effort; but the same motivation to help and dedication to a mission and to responsibilities motivated Dan and Frances and the people they knew in the Virginia Mennonite Conference. People who worked for the

church and the church college gave up much and fulfilled their call to serve with complete dedication. At the same time Dan and Frances were working at Ridgeway Mennonite Church other families worked at churches in the mountains or small towns or accepted the call to be missionaries in other cities in the US or overseas. Seeing other families with equal calling and making similar efforts was motivating to their cohorts.

Dan and Frances arrived at their dedication to the Mennonite Church on different paths. Frances grew up in the family of J. Harvey Yoder, a farmer and businessman, in the Warwick River Mennonite Church in Denbigh (Newport News), Virginia. Her mother died when Frances was in her early twenties, but the family was stable and older sisters did the mothering in the home. She graduated from Morrison High School. Frances became a Christian and joined the church with a group of friends. She participated in the church and its programs and slowly matured as a church member and participant.

Dan, on the other hand, had a rebellious phase before becoming a Christian and taking part in the church. Dan spoke about this period, even later in life, with regret. He was sad that he did the things he later regretted even though he felt forgiven. Dan's parents, Dan Sr. and Verna Mast Smucker, had some financial setbacks. For this reason and in the search for a church community that suited both of them, Dan and Verna moved a number of times. They lived in Denbigh and Fentress, Virginia, and in Wayne County and Holmes County, Ohio at different times. These moves may have contributed to a sense of instability in Dan's life.

Dan's family had some tragedies as well. Some children died young, there were illnesses,

1. Tom Brokaw, *The Greatest Generation* (Random House, New York, 1998).



Back row: Karen, Gary, Larry, Jean, Thabo. Front row: Lara, Frances, Dan, Atieno, 1989.

Photo from Gary Smucker

and a brother died tragically before Dan became a Christian. He had to quit school before eighth grade to help the family on the farm because of the financial reverses. Dan regretted his lack of education later in life. Whatever the reasons were, Dan became rebellious and started running with the wrong crowd. They lived in Fentress (Chesapeake), Virginia at the time, and he caused much anxiety and worry for his parents.

Dan told the story a number of times of the prayers of his family, especially his mother, and other people in the Mount Pleasant Mennonite Church, and of his conversion. He attended a revival meeting and felt the call to change his life one night (1939). So Dan's path into active church participation was a sudden reversal. He had, of course, been raised with the teaching of the church, but his time of rebellion gave him a special appreciation for the church and a certain empathy with others who were in the state of rebellion where he had been.

When Dan and Frances met as young adults (1942) it was not the first time because they had attended elementary school together. They might seem to be opposites. Frances' family was a prosperous one, and Dan's family

had just made another move because of financial difficulties. When Dan confessed to Frances, in an effort to be honest, some of the things he had done during his rebellious phase, she had second thoughts and suggested they take a break for a while.

But before long they were dating again. In spite of differences in personalities and backgrounds, they were a good match. Frances was a life-long cheerleader for Dan, his goals, his achievements, and his work. Dan relied on Frances for support and to help him in areas where he was weak. Frances pushed Dan to do things that he probably would never have done on his own. Two examples are obtaining a GED high school equivalency certificate and moving to Africa as volunteers for two years. Although Dan teased her, intensely sometimes, he always treated her with respect, admiration, and a kind and gentle love. Frances was Dan's 'Flower,' his pet name for her from the early days of their relationship.

Dan and Frances moved to Harrisonburg after their first son was born (1943). The move to the Shenandoah Valley was a big event in their life journey. Frances was away from her family, and she bonded with Dan's family especially his mother who she came to depend on for many things as she had two handicapped children to care for and the responsibilities of a pastor's wife.

After they moved to adjoining farms on Route 42 north of Harrisonburg (1943), Dan's mother and his three single sisters were very supportive in providing child care and the 'village' concept of nurture and child rearing. Grammy and Pop and the Aunties had a huge influence on the children.

The forty-two-acre farm was rocky and suited mainly for pasture land. From the farm came milk, butter, cottage cheese, chickens, eggs, pork, beef, and lamb for the family. The

quarter-acre garden provided food for the table and to preserve and use later. In the 1940s and '50s when the family income was low they depended on the farm for much of the food the growing family needed.

Dan and Frances considered family the most important calling among all the things they were called do. They showed by words and actions that all of their children were loved. They praised the achievements of the children and sometimes disciplined to keep the children on the 'straight and narrow.' They budgeted carefully to send Gary, Jean, and Karen to Eastern Mennonite High School; and as the children completed higher education programs they praised and honored those achievements.

The fact that Dan and Frances had two children who could not make these achievements brought both sadness and a serious sense of responsibility to care for them. The first born son and the fourth child, a daughter, were born with disabilities that allowed them only to develop skills less than a six month-old child would have.

Frances would have been happy with twenty-five grandchildren and would have loved every one of them. Jean's three children were the only grandchildren born to them. At one point, quoting her grandson, Frances said about grandchildren: "I have quality, not quantity, in my grandchildren." Dan and Frances' grandchildren were adored, loved, and embraced completely. In fact, it is clear that since their grandchildren were in Africa it had some influence on the decision for Dan and Frances to make the move to Botswana in southern Africa as volunteers when they were in their 60s. As their children's achievements had been honored, the grandchildren were honored as well. Since they were semi-retired as the grandchildren came along the



Dan and Frances Smucker, 1992.

Photo from Gary Smucker

grandparents had time to devote to enjoying them.

The call to serve at Red Hill Mission (Ridgeway Mennonite Church) on the east side of Harrisonburg came to Dan and Frances in Newport News while Dan was the manager of the mobile cannery (1946). The meat canner was developed to help with the hunger and food shortages in Europe after World War II, and it moved to various Mennonite communities to process the meat that people donated.

After thinking and praying Dan and Frances accepted the call to serve the Red Hill community. At that time Mennonite pastors in large congregations were chosen to serve by the "lot." Ministers were ordained but considered



Dan Smucker at the barn, 2000s.

Photo from Gary Smucker

as among equals in the congregation with other members. They were not expected to have training or any special education. They were not paid and were expected to have a farm or business to support themselves and their family.

As mission workers at Red Hill Mission, however, Dan and Frances were given a small stipend. It was not enough to support a family so Dan continued to work. When Dan went to work at the body shop where Dwight Hartman was the owner he found a very supportive and helpful supervisor who gave Dan time off when he needed to work for the church.

Dan and Frances decided to open a body shop for their income (1959). They built a two car garage, and the plan was that Dan would repair cars as his schedule with the church work permitted. Very soon after opening the body shop, Lee Kiser came to work there. Dan became Lee's mentor and then soon his colleague and lifelong friend. Lee was the responsible worker who allowed Dan the time off he needed to pastor a growing church.

In his sixties, as Dan was ready to transition out of being a business owner, Lee Kiser was ready to step in and take over. Behind Lee came Don Hensley who gradually became the next owner of the business after Lee. When Dan and Frances decided to work as volunteers in Botswana in southern Africa, Lee could operate the business. Long before that Dan was happy to turn over to Lee and Juanita, his wife, many of the management duties which Dan never really felt comfortable with and which Lee did better.

As a business owner Dan moved in a completely different world from a pastor's world. He became acquainted with car dealers, suppliers, bankers, and service business owners. He had a reputation for being honest as a business owner and as good as his word.

Their son said, "I worked in the body shop for a number of years. I never saw Dad do something dishonest as a businessman. Not that he didn't make a mistake sometimes, and the customers were not always one hundred percent happy. But I never saw Dad deliberately try to deceive business associates or customers. And I never saw him trying to take money that he didn't feel he had earned."

Dan was fortunate as a business owner. Many businesses fail before the end of two years. Dan's special skill was in working with people, although he was very good with a hammer and a welding torch too. In the car body repair business Dan hired many young workers just out of school to mentor them to become body mechanics. Some were successful, others were not, but as long as the young man was willing, working hard, and trying, Dan was patient in his training. Some of the men later became body shop owners opening up a competing business, but they and Dan remained on friendly terms. And Dan's Body Service was operated by the mechanics that Dan, and later Lee, trained.

When Dan and Frances decided to volunteer for two years in the Serowe Brigades to train body mechanics for the country of Botswana, the experience Dan had in mentoring and training in the body shop in Harrisonburg was useful. Frances' abilities to befriend many types of people was developed and honed at Ridgeway. Her skills were useful in the community where they lived in Botswana, in the house church they attended, and with the volunteers they encountered (1974-76).

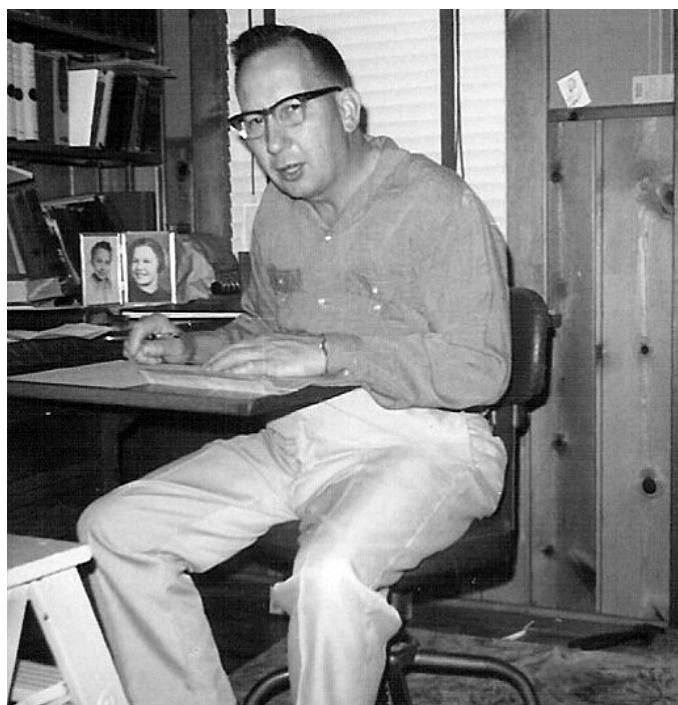
Five years after they returned from Botswana Dan and Frances were asked to live abroad again. This time they were sent to Trinidad to train ministers in the Mennonite Churches there for one year (1981-82). Once

again Frances' friendliness and concern to help others and Dan's mentoring skills and years of Bible study made their time of service a success.

Their work as an interim pastor team at a number of churches allowed both Frances and Dan to use their skills developed at Ridgeway. At all of these churches friendships continued as they moved on to other responsibilities. And they were called on for weddings and funerals of people they learned to know over the years. And continuing contact with the grandchildren was a great joy for them.

The year that Frances fell ill with multiple myeloma, was the time for a long, sweet, sad goodbye for the family, especially for Dan (1999). Frances needed to go to dialysis three times a week and gradually lost her homemaking skills. Dan gradually took over the housework and, although he did not know it, developed skills to take care of himself for the nine years after his Flower was gone.

When his wife died Dan was sad and lonely, but he was also resilient and determined. He continued to go to the body shop daily to interact with the employees at coffee break time. He spent time in the "hobby shop" which was a woodworking shop next to the body shop. His most famous project was building his coffin out of walnut wood from the farm. It became famous when the local newspaper published an article about 'the man who is making his own coffin,' and the article went on the AP wire service and was published in many newspapers. A Chinese TV producer read the article and came to interview Dan. He kept busy with church activities, family contacts, and travel. He visited Trinidad and traveled to see Karen and Jim in Idaho. Dan loved giving rides in the antique vehicles he brought back to life with his body mechanic skills.



Dan Smucker working on a sermon in early 1950s.

Photo from Gary Smucker

Although he had various health issues Dan lived a full life right to the end. The Sunday before his death Dan drove himself to church. He came home from the hospital to hospice care and sat at the table the day before his death joking with his family. Just before Thanksgiving in 2008 he was buried in the coffin he had prepared for himself.

Dad and Frances were not perfect people. It is not difficult to find things they might have done differently or in a better way. They were remarkable people, however; and they did much in their lifetimes to make the world a better place. They touched the lives of many people, and they grew and developed over the years from the many people they came in contact with. Dan and Frances used their natural talents and developed skills throughout their time on earth to improve their lives and the lives of the people they met.



Dan Smucker (left) giving a ride in his Model T Ford with Mohammed Togane in the front, and a friend of his in the back seat.

Photo from Gary Smucker

The *Shenandoah Mennonite Historian* is published quarterly by the Shenandoah Valley Mennonite Historians, established in 1993.

Officers of the Historians:

Chair, James L Hershberger

Treasurer, Sheldon "Pete" Burkholder

Secretary, James Rush

Lois Bowman

Gerald R. Brunk

Elwood E. Yoder, Editor

Shenandoah Valley Mennonite Historians
780 Parkwood Drive
Harrisonburg, VA 22802

If you have an idea for an article or picture for the *Historian*, contact the Editor at elyoder@gmail.com.

Past issues of the *Shenandoah Mennonite Historian* can be found in PDF format at http://mennonitearchivesofvirginia.net/Shenandoah_Historian.html

An annual individual membership fee for the Shenandoah Valley Mennonite Historians is \$10.00 per year, which includes a subscription to the *Historian*. Additional family memberships are \$5 each. Send membership fees or inquiries to James Rush, e-mail at jameslrush@comcast.net, phone 540-434-0792, or U.S. mail to James Rush, 780 Parkwood Drive, Harrisonburg, Virginia, 22802.