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The Tragic Loss of Jacob A. Shenk and Melvin Weaver

Geraldine W. Rush has written a heartbreaking but inspirational article about a tragedy that took place in March, 1950. Assisted by her husband, James L. Rush, she has summarized an event that is both historical but also a faith-building story that cannot help but encourage the reader. Both Jacob A. Shenk (1900-1950) and Melvin Weaver (1923-1950) were men of deep faith and committed their lives with abandon to God's kingdom.

Here is a narrative account of history, from Virginia and Tennessee, that needs to be told to those who haven't heard it. Pass this story on to your children and grandchildren, and so encourage them to also dedicate their lives to God's call like Shenk and Weaver.

Thank you Geraldine and James for this article, your research, and for obtaining the photos.

Miriam (Lehman) and Melvin Weaver, wedding photo, May 1945.

Photo from Kathy Weaver Kurtz

Calvary Baptist Church (above), Mountain City, Tennessee, which started as a result of the plane crash of Jacob A. Shenk and Melvin Weaver in 1950.

Photo from Dorothy Jean Weaver



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Tragedies, Pain of Loss and Faith: The Tragic Loss of Jacob A. Shenk and Melvin Weaver

by Geraldine W. Rush with James L. Rush, Researcher

Sixty-seven years ago on March 24, 1950, on a return flight from investigating a Virginia Mennonite Mission (VMM) Board outreach possibility in Knoxville, Tennessee, businessman Jacob A. Shenk and mission worker Melvin Weaver encountered violent air disturbances that threw their private plane out-of-control and led to their tragic demise. At Jacob A. Shenk's funeral, 1800 persons jammed Eastern Mennonite College's auditorium, crowded into the halls, the basement, and overflowed onto the grounds to hear the service over the loud speaker system.¹ Writers eulogizing the life and faith of these two men in the VMM's *Missionary Light* and the *Eastern Mennonite College Journal* wrote of the depth of their Christian experience. The remarkable funeral and the amazing articles



Jacob and Lucy Shenk wedding photo, December, 1926.

Ellen Shenk photo

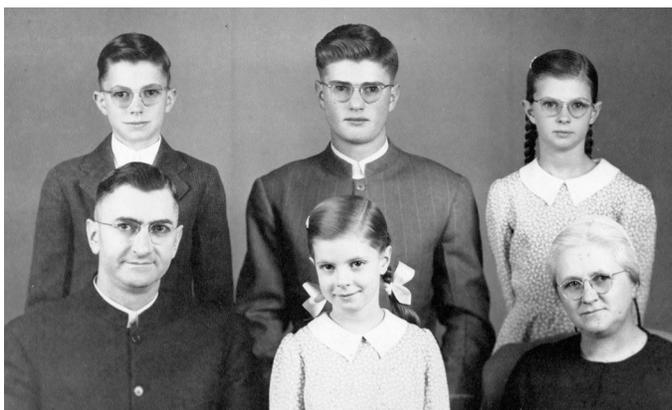
on the two men's lives merit a look again at the faith expressed in the midst of the pain of tragic loss.

As a highly energetic individual, Jacob A. Shenk, age fifty, was a successful entrepreneur and a community leader. In 1933, he bought the Garber Hatchery, changed



Airplane wreckage from March 24, 1950, from near Mountain City, Tennessee, which killed both Jacob A. Shenk, 50, and Melvin Weaver, 26. Photos from Dorothy Jean Weaver

its name, and in seventeen years expanded it to the largest and most progressive hatchery in the Commonwealth of Virginia, one of the largest in the South, with a capacity of over a million eggs.² The hatchery supplied chicks to all of Virginia, West Virginia, neighboring states as far north as Massachusetts, and south



Jacob A. Shenk (front left), Ellen, and Lucy Shenk. Back, from left, James, Paul, and Virginia Shenk, in 1940s.

Photo from James Shenk

1. Julia Gwin, "Jacob Andrew Shenk, Biography of a Man Who was a Steward of the Lord," *Virginia and the Virginia County* (March 1952): 23.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 22.



Mission Executive J. D. Graber (left) meets Jacob A. Shenk, mid-1940s.

Photo from James Shenk

to Georgia.³ As a church and community leader, he served on the Board of Trustees of Eastern Mennonite College from 1942 to 1950 and was chair of its building committee, served on the board of the Virginia Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities and became its President from 1943 to 1950, and was the Vice-President of the new Harrisonburg Memorial Hospital at the time of his death.

Having taken a drafting course by correspondence years earlier, and with some building experience, Jacob A. Shenk designed and helped finance the building of then Eastern Mennonite College Lehman Chapel, and the new half-million dollar Northlawn Women's Dormitory that opened in the fall of 1950. He also designed the Lindale, Zion, Broad Street, and Ridgeway church buildings.⁴ Within the broader community, he contributed \$10,000 to the new Harrisonburg Memorial Hospital and was responsible for raising an additional \$100,000 from the small group of

Mennonites of the area for that project.⁵

As a Christian, Jacob was legendary even while he was living. Inspired by Albert W. Larimer's book about H. G. LaTourneau in *God Runs My Business*, Shenk made a highly unusual arrangement with the Federal Government to give ninety percent of his net income to the church and to charity for a ten-year probationary period after which the ninety percent was to become tax free.⁶ He kept ten percent for his family. He died two years before the completion of his program and the government ruled that the program ended with his death.⁷ J. D. Graber, in tribute to Shenk, wrote in *Missionary Light*, "His sense of stewardship was, I think, his outstanding quality."⁸

Graber also noted that Shenk had a deep sense of divine call. Shenk and his wife Lucy were active as Sunday School teachers at a local mission church; he was a Superintendent of the Sunday School and a deacon in the church. Add the Christian commitment in church and business activities and the mission expansion as President of the Virginia Mennonite Mission Board to Shenk's sense of stewardship, and a



Chester K. and Myra Lehman (left), Miriam (Lehman) and Melvin Weaver, and Elizabeth and Amos H. Weaver, May

1945.

Photo from Dorothy Jean Weaver

3. Calvin W. Redekop and Benjamin W. Redekop, Editors, *Entrepreneurs in the Faith Community: Profiles of Mennonites in Business*, (Herald Press, Scottsdale, PA, Waterloo, ON, 1996): 25.

4. Gwin, p. 23.

5. Ibid, p. 23.

6. Gwin, p. 22 and Redekop and Redekop, p. 29.

7. Gwin, p. 22.

8. J. D. Graber, "An Appreciation," *Missionary Light* (Vol X, No. 3, May-June 1950): 14.



Melvin Weaver and daughters, Lost Creek, Kentucky, 1948.

Photo from Kathy Weaver Kurtz

picture emerges of an individual whose sense of divine call permeated his family, business, and public life.

Melvin Weaver, age twenty-six at the time of his death, was remembered by Harold D. Lehman as an individual whose earnest desire was to know what God wanted for his life. “He had a concern for souls

and a willingness to meet their needs as the Lord gave grace.”⁹ He entered his first mission assignment in June 1945 after graduating from Eastern Mennonite College with a Bachelors of Theology degree May 15, 1945, and marrying Miriam Lehman on May 16. He taught Bible School and day school at Lost Creek, Kentucky, and had charge of the services on Sundays until the summer of 1949 at Lost Creek and Burchett’s Flat or Lost Creek and Silver Hill.¹⁰ From then until January 1950, Melvin and Miriam lived at Crockett, Kentucky, where they were coworkers with Paul and Mary Landis. The family returned to Park View to attend ministers’ course in January 1950 and to plan their next assignment.

Life was primitive in the Kentucky hills as evidenced by the fact that the twenty-mile

trip to town was a two-hour ride. In *Gospel Herald*, Melvin and Miriam wrote about travel in the rugged territory in the following imaginative terms: “bumping and bouncing in the jeep over the rough roads; riding horses when the trails were too rough and steep for the jeep; walking and hanging on to the horse’s tail for assistance up some very steep hills.”¹¹ The lack of modern conveniences meant performing routine tasks was time demanding.

Melvin’s mechanical talents increased his usefulness to the community. He repaired their automobiles and other articles, ran time consuming errands via a Jeep or horse on muddy roads, took folks to town, and made purchases for others. Melvin loved the folks in the community and saw all the contacts as opportunities for witnessing to them about Christ.¹²

In a poignant paragraph, Lester A. Shank wrote of Melvin Weaver:

“We are inclined to measure a life in terms of the number of days and years an individual has lived. But a life cannot be measured in this way only. Rather, a life must be measured in terms of the quality of the individual’s contribution to his fellow men, and the kind of memory which lives on in



Melvin and Miriam Weaver, Lost Creek, Kentucky.

Photo from Kathy Weaver Kurtz

9. Truman H. Brunk, “A Yielded Life,” *Missionary Light* (Vol X, No. 3, May-June 1950): 10.

10. Harold D. Lehman, “Melvin H. Weaver,” *Missionary Light* (Vol X, No. 3, May-June 1950): 5.

11. Melvin H. and Miriam Weaver, “Summer Bible School in Kentucky,” *Gospel Herald* (April 18, 1950): 374.

12. Lehman, p. 5.



Miriam Weaver, Lost Creek, Kentucky.

Photo from Kathy Weaver Kurtz

the lives of those who knew him, after his passing. To say that Melvin H. Weaver was twenty-six years of age at the time he was called Home, may give the impression that his life was a short one. But to recall the depth of his Christian experience, his humility, his unselfishness, his burden for the

unsaved, his consecration to his tasks, and his uprightness of character, one is reminded that his life was a large and full one."¹³

The sudden death of these two family-oriented men left their nuclear families without a father figure when there were young children at home. At the time of his death, Jacob A. Shenk's children were Jacob Paul, age nineteen, James Allen, age sixteen, Virginia Ann, age eleven, and Ellen Joyce, age eight. Melvin Weaver's children were Kathleen Joyce, age three, Carol Ann, age two, and Dorothy Jean, nine weeks old. In the midst of their deep loss and loneliness, Lucy Shenk and Miriam Weaver became head of their family households.

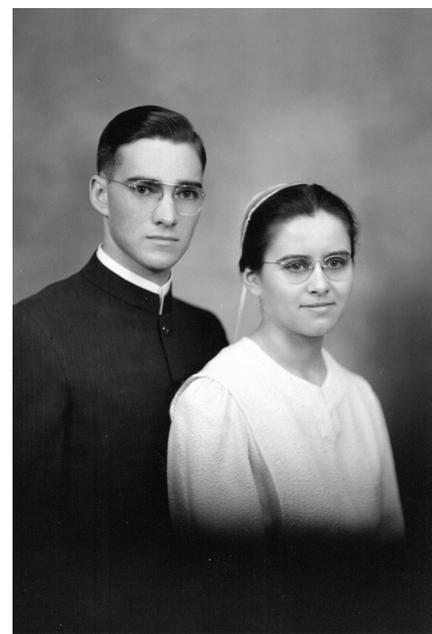
Jacob's will stipulated that Lucy, co-owner of Shenk Hatchery, would become president in his absence or death and be assisted by a consulting or advisory group. However, the pressure on her was to nurture the surviving

members of the young family. The advisory group, with Robert Messner appointed as general manager, guided daily operations till the company closed eight years later in 1958.¹⁴ Lucy and company management had to convince

a Richmond bank not to call in loans used for expansion, deal with employee unrest, disease problems, an expensive breeding program, increased competition, and the loss of Jacob's strong personal leadership.

The pain of the tragedy was softened for Lucy Shenk as she saw the good that unfolded as a result of the accident. Fifteen years after the tragedy, she made her third visit to Mountain City, Tennessee, the site of the tragedy. She visited Calvary Baptist Church, which was originally dedicated May 29, 1955. This and several other churches in the Mountain City community were an outgrowth of that tragic accident.¹⁵

Miriam Weaver faced multiple challenges in March 1950. Her nine-week-old daughter Dorothy Jean had been born two months prematurely and spent the first month in the hospital. She lost her happy, cheerful, calm, steady companion, with their treasured family



Melvin and Miriam Weaver wedding photo, May 1945.

Photo from Kathy Weaver Kurtz

13. Lester C. Shank, "In Appreciation of Melvin Weaver," *The Eastern Mennonite College Journal* (Vol XXVIII, No. 6, June, 1950): 3.

14. Redekop and Redekop, Editors, p. 28.

15. Mrs. Jacob A. Shenk, "Evening Time—The Time to Go Home," *Missionary Light* (Jan-Feb, 1965): 2.



Lost Creek School, Kentucky, where Melvin Weaver taught.

Photo from Kathy Weaver Kurtz

worship times and heart-to-heart talks. She lost a partner who took turns getting up nights to care for the baby.¹⁶ As a mission worker, she had very little cash or other assets.

Unquestionably, there were struggles as a young single parent family, but Miriam made a conscious decision to go on living life with a strong drive to celebrate life. Christmas became a highly significant family celebration and hospitality, where the serving of ordinary foods becomes a special event, was a trademark.¹⁷

Financially, Miriam, with her two-year college degree, was eligible to teach to support her family. But with extended family support, she chose to complete a four-year degree and then supported her young family by teaching at Augusta Mennonite School, near Waynesboro, Virginia, and subsequently worked for Ruth Brunk Stoltzfus's Heart to Heart radio program, and taught business courses at Eastern Mennonite High School (EMHS). She completed a Masters in Business Education degree from Virginia Tech in 1963 to enhance her teaching at EMHS and in 1969 began teaching in Eastern Mennonite College's (EMC) secretarial program. Upon closure of

the secretarial program, she worked in the various college departments until she retired in 1985.¹⁸

Tragic events create empty holes: a business or mission position not easily filled by others, organizations whose projects will have to be completed by others and that will have to re-organize as leadership has been lost, a family relationship lost forever. Some in the business world, in which Jacob Shenk actively participated, expressed their response to the loss through resolutions, e.g., the resolutions passed by the Virginia Poultry Federation Board of Directors, or through an action such as taken at the Southeastern Poultry Federation level.

On receiving word of Shenk's death, the Virginia Poultry Federation passed six resolutions that were sent to Shenk's wife Lucy. Resolution two stated, "his [Jacob A. Shenk's] friends in the poultry industry in Virginia will sorely miss his unfailing kindness, his generous assistance and counsel, and his strong Christian business principles which have so often steered us in the right direction and



Lost Creek School, Kentucky, where Melvin Weaver taught, with Don Jacobs visiting, back row, far left.

Photo from Kathy Weaver Kurtz

16. Weaver, p. 10.

17. Interview with Dorothy Jean Weaver, Harrisonburg, Virginia, by Geraldine W. Rush, February 21, 2017.

18. Interviews with Dorothy Jean Weaver and Kathie Weaver Kurtz, February 21 and 24, 2017, respectively by Geraldine W. Rush, revealed that Miriam Weaver taught at Augusta Mennonite School in 1955-1956, worked as a secretary to Ruth Brunk Stoltzfus, speaker for the radio program Heart to Heart, 1956-1957, taught business courses at Eastern Mennonite High School 1957-1968, and taught secretarial courses and worked in various departments at Eastern Mennonite College 1969-1985.

kept us from many errors.”¹⁹ The Southeastern Poultry Federation responded to Shenk’s death with an action not to have Sunday meetings the year after his death. This respectful action was in response to a comment Shenk made in his invited address to the convention held in Atlanta, Georgia, to the effect that if business activities were allowed to crowd in on the Lord’s day, it took away time that was needed to develop spiritual needs. “If we do this the time will come when we will have no Christianity to mix with business.”²⁰

The quality of Jacob A. Shenk’s and Melvin H. Weaver’s lives tempered the pain associated with their deaths for their families, as well. Miriam Weaver commented, in her eulogy, that she and Melvin prayed for the Lord’s



James A. Shenk (left) and Mahlon Blosser, in Kentucky mission field.

Ellen Shenk photo

definitive guidance in their courtship, in their call to serve Him in mission work, and for a specific mission

assignment and wrote, “What regrets might be mine if we hadn’t followed the Lord’s leading.”²¹

Lucy Shenk experienced a similar relationship with Jacob. In her article, “An Appreciation of Jacob as My Husband,” she wrote,

He [Jacob] shared life with me – the joys, sorrows, problems, and triumphs – until I felt that I knew his life as I



Andrew Jantzi revival meetings with Park View Melodians Quartet, Paintsville, Kentucky, Summer, 1949. From left, Mark Lehman, John Martin, Robert Lehman, James Stauffer, and Andrew Jantzi, evangelist.

Photo from Kathy Weaver Kurtz

knew my own. He found God as One in whom he trusted for guidance in the small things as well as the big problems which came to him. He took seriously his personal responsibility to God for the work he felt He had asked him to do. Now in this time of deep loss and loneliness, it is God’s grace that sustains.”²²

The depth of Jacob A. Shenk’s and Melvin H. Weaver’s Christian experience permeated their family, friend, coworker, business and community relationships. Their lives were of such a quality that their memories live on, even now, sixty-seven years after that tragic event!



Miriam Weaver (left) with Dorothy Jean, Kathleen, and Carol Ann Weaver, at memorial for Melvin Weaver.

Photo from Dorothy Jean Weaver

19. Redekop and Redekop, Editors, p. 27.

20. Gwin, p. 51

21. Weaver, p. 10.

22. Mrs. Jacob A. Shenk, “An Appreciation of Jacob as My Husband,” *Missionary Light* (Vol X, No. 3, May-June 1950): 6.



Melvin Weaver (back row middle left) with Eastern Mennonite College Senior Class, May 1945. Lehman Auditorium, in background, was named for Melvin Weaver's father-in-law, Chester K. Lehman, and the Auditorium was designed by Jacob A. Shenk.

Kathy Weaver Kurtz photo

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