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WHAT IS A VIRGINIA MENNONITE?

Forty years ago, in 1976, Grace Showalter wrote a landmark essay about the characteristics of Virginia Mennonites. We publish Grace's important essay for our readers in this issue.

Grace Showalter (1925-1990) was a member of the Zion Mennonite Church, Broadway, Va., for most of her life, and was on the faculty of Eastern Mennonite College for thirty-five years as an English teacher and Librarian of the Menno Simons Historical Library and Archives. Her reputation as a historian and a genealogist was widespread.



Sam and Jan Showalter (right) will speak about their Showalter family tour in Europe on November 12, 2016, at the Annual Meeting. On left are Elva Showalter Rhodes and Miriam Showalter.

Her seminal essay, often read and used by later historians, appeared in *Missionary Light*, August, 1976.

The Editor asked Sheldon "Pete" Burkholder, to reflect on Grace Showalter's essay and write something for 2016. Sheldon is Treasurer for the Shenandoah Historians. Virginia Bishop Peter Burkholder (1783-1846) is Sheldon's great-great-great grandfather. Sheldon is a member at Harrisonburg Mennonite Church.

Please reserve **Saturday, November 12, 2016, 9:30 a.m.**, for the Historians Annual Meeting. The meeting will take place in Village Hall, at VMRC, Harrisonburg (at intersection of Heritage Drive and Shank Drive). Jan and Sam Showalter will speak about their Showalter family trip to Europe.

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The Virginia Mennonite¹

by Grace Showalter

(reprinted from *Missionary Light*, July-August 1976)

“It takes a long time to make a Virginian,” a well-known Virginian once said. If a Virginia Mennonite is at least 50 years of age, he understands the statement because he knows about the Virginia that was prior to the influx of Mennonites from other states. After about 1900, and especially after the advent of Eastern Mennonite School in 1917, Virginia no longer stood isolated from other Mennonite communities. A new Virginia Mennonite began to emerge as people from other areas began to move in, or evangelists from out-of-state came, bringing with them their own culture and set of religious teachings.

What was the nature of the old Virginia, and what were the circumstances and influences that shaped the old Virginia personality?

In many ways the Virginia Conference was on the frontier—not of the West, but of the South. In Virginia the German culture met head-on with the English; while the Shenandoah Valley population was predominantly German, the English influence was strongly present. Many of the prestigious, prosperous, and leading non-Mennonite families were English and Scotch-Irish.

Virginia was one of the few states where Mennonites lived and worked with an actively slave-holding society. The problem of hiring slaves and trading labor with slave-holding neighbors led to an action by the Virginia Conference in 1864.

“Inasmuch as it is against our creed and discipline to own or traffic in slaves; so it is also forbidden for a brother to hire a slave unless such slave be entitled to receive the pay for such

labor by the consent of his owner. But where neighbors exchange labor, the labor of slaves may be received.”

The Virginia Mennonites suffered the shock of seeing their home ground become a battlefield. Both Union and Confederate soldiers robbed them of their goods. They lived through the final stages of the War, when they had to witness their barns and sometimes their homes being consumed by the Northern flames. Perhaps the War and the long tedious reconstruction drew the people together in an unusual way. The same experiences caused them to be Southern in sympathy, even though they were Northern in their belief.

Because they were sparsely populated, the Virginia Mennonites did not join field to field and farm to farm as was the case in many other states. The average Mennonite family had several non-Mennonite neighbors.

What did all this do to the Virginia Mennonite? What type of person did he become? Both good and undesirable things happened.

On the negative side, there was a great loss of young people to the church. On the positive side, the people did not become culturally ingrown. They took some of the culture of their English neighbors. For example: titles of respect, such as “Aunt” and “Uncle” or “Mr.” and Mrs.” for older persons were taught to the young. It was considered rude to address your elders on a first name basis. Other subtle refinements of the English became evident among the people.

In Virginia the German language and its culturally protective arms were cast aside early. In 1837 *The Confession of Faith* was printed in English for Mennonite use; in 1847 the first Mennonite English hymn book was published by authority of the Virginia Conference.

With the language barrier gone, the

1. Showalter, Grace. “The Virginia Mennonite.” *Missionary Light*, Vol. XXXVII, No. 4, (August 1976): 2-3.

Mennonites could interact even more freely with their neighbors—in both giving and receiving.

One thing they shared outside their own denomination was their faith. This they did by sending ministers into the rural and highland areas. By 1920 they had about 20 preaching points. This extension outreach was a new thing in Mennonite history. Historian Harry Brunk called this “School House Evangelism.” This perhaps more than anything else shaped the Virginia Mennonite outlook. The Mennonites learned that they needed to be flexible and relax some of their culturally rooted practices, and they learned to accommodate themselves to changes which did not affect principles. New surnames began to appear on membership lists and the vision of the church was broadened. Adding members from another culture broadened the basis of brotherhood, love, and respect.

The Virginia Church was a singing church. Joseph Funk, his songs, and grandsons began a singing school and music publishing tradition. Their influence can never be fully measured. The religious songs of Funk’s choosing certainly affected the faith and life of the people.

It is significant that Eastern Mennonite College had its birth in Virginia, one of the states with a comparatively small Mennonite population. By 1930 it was not at all unusual for Virginia Mennonite youth to get a high school education. Some had normal school training.

True to the South, the Virginia Mennonites were hospitable and friendly.

What were the spiritual characteristics of the Mennonites of Virginia? Perhaps early newcomers to the state wondered at both the religiously liberal and culturally conventional nature of the people. They found in Virginians

a spiritual reserve not to be mistaken for coldness. Spiritual growth was not a thing to be flaunted, nor was it measured by quick emotional “highs.” Unfortunately, as elsewhere in the Mennonite Church, some did not believe they could presume on the mercy of God; to them salvation was a hope, not a certainty. Others had a faith and serenity that was reflected in their quiet testimony. Perhaps more than anything else, it was the Southern contentuality [*sic*],² not a religious conservatism that made the old-line Virginians slow to take on new programs and express themselves freely in public meetings. Also deference to age caused the younger to wait on their elders.

The newcomers to Virginia today may be puzzled by the older Virginia Mennonites. How can such undemonstrative persons show such beautiful spiritual serenity? There is nothing strange about it. They are just reflecting a Mennonite culture that grew in a different setting.



Grace Showalter (1925-1990) was a historian and teacher at Eastern Mennonite University for thirty-five years.

photo from Karla Souder

2. It is uncertain what Grace Showalter meant by “contentuality.” She may have meant “contentiousness,” but Sheldon “Pete” Burkholder’s guess in the following article is best, that she probably meant independence or privacy.

Mennonites in Today's Virginia

by Sheldon "Pete" Burkholder
(a response to Grace Showalter's 1976 essay)

With the emphasis on evangelism, welcoming, and integration (of both new members and the national conferences) of the last thirty years or so, there is hardly any "Virginia" distinctive to be talked about. In fact there may be none! Grace Showalter was certainly correct in reminding us that the WAR and the GERMAN language "loss" around the century's turn made "Virginia" Mennonites uniquely different from those in tight communities in Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Indiana, but it really was only a matter of timing. Those communities very soon found themselves accommodating to the cultures surrounding them, and there have been more recent wars, despite the Southern insistence! I dare say that the music "tradition," and the desire to be missional characterized all Mennonites by the thirties or soon after (even if the author was claiming differences due to Joseph Funk, and the West Virginia outposts). Mennonite communities developing in Tidewater and then northern Virginia, and the many non-Virginia candidates for EMU and Seminary only increased the rate of integration.

Spiritually she speaks of "contentionality" (which she hopefully meant as independence or privacy, as opposed to contentiousness), but certainly all of American Protestantism became more "American" in regards to a more private faith and practice, especially relative to money, market participation and less mutuality. We all became purchasers, then purveyors, of insurances, bank notes, and the stock market. I would say we are relatively conventional evangelicals today.

"Virginians" today (the Mennonite

ones) are a merged culture, both within and without the church, and that commingling is progressive in the church worldwide. To hold (back) to anything else would seem to me to be un-Mennonite, and maybe un-Christian, in these last days when we are commissioned to go everywhere, loving and discipling all peoples.

The Accomplishments of George R.

Brunk II

by Braden Brunk

Editor's note: Braden Brunk is a great-grandson of George R. Brunk II, and he wrote this essay in 9th grade history class while a student of the Editor in 2015 at Eastern Mennonite High School. Braden has shown great interest in history, and in order to encourage the younger generation's interest in history, we publish Braden's essay. We keep Braden's MLA in-text citations pattern instead of the normal Chicago footnote citation style used in Historian.



Braden
Brunk, 2015

George R. Brunk was born in Denbigh on Nov. 18, 1911. He was the son of George R. Brunk and Katie W. Brunk. Brunk was the 6th child of the family. Brunk's father was not around home much during his childhood. On one occasion Brunk's father was away for six months due to a heart condition (Brunk, Shirley). Brunk married Margaret in 1933. George R. Brunk was an important Mennonite in 20th century American history.

Brunk served as a teacher at Eastern Mennonite College (now called Eastern Mennonite University). Brunk taught practical theology at EMC from 1949-1978. Brunk also served as a seminary dean from 1967-1976. Before Brunk was a teacher, he earned many degrees and certificates from school. He graduated from Eastern Mennonite High

School after attending three years at Morrison high school, earned a B.A. from the College of William and Mary, a Th.D. degree from Union Theological seminary, and a Th.B. degree from EMU ("George Brunk"). Brunk also earned his license to be a pilot at the college of William and Mary ("George Brunk").

During his lifetime Brunk felt a calling for pastoral ministry and served for more than 65 years (Brunk, Gerald). One important thing that he did was conduct evangelistic tent crusades with several members of his family ("George Brunk"). They would line up trucks and go on huge road trips. Brunk set up in Virginia and in places such as Nebraska and Oregon. When Brunk arrived with his family, they would set up huge tents and had room for thousands of people. Brunk had one truck that turned into a stage that he could preach on. Sometimes on these trips Brunk would fly ahead in his plane and survey the area where they were going to set up. Gerald Brunk (George Brunk the second's son) would lead worship before the sermon ("Brunk, Gerald").

One time Brunk went to Steinbach Canada. During his time there he offered English sermons that criticized churches. Brunk also preached about faith superseding tradition. Journalist Frank H. Epp stated that "Tradition can be either master or servant to the Christian faith." (Loewen page 149)

On one special trip Brunk went and set up every night for over seven weeks. On each night during this time he would have an estimated ten thousand people show up for his sermons. Sometimes Brunk would fly his airplane around and take aerial pictures from his plane ("Brunk, Gerald").

George had a brother named Lawrence Brunk. Lawrence owned a poultry business before going on these revival trips with George. In order to afford the equipment

needed to support these trips Lawrence sold his poultry business and bought the trucks and tents needed for the revival sermons. Before Lawrence sold his business he looked into one of his chicken houses and had a vision that someday he was going to see that many people looking at them during one of the sermons ("Brunk, Gerald").

On the last night of the seven week revival sermons Brunk had an estimated total of fifteen thousand people attending. Even some Amish people attended, though they were not supposed to. Some of the other Amish people would listen from the corn fields ("Brunk, Gerald").

One other great thing that Brunk did as an evangelist was mission work in Nigeria. He was invited to Nigeria by Brother Ephraim, after Brunk and the pastor had been communicating for a while. While he was there he preached about fundamentals and basically started the foundation for a Mennonite community. He also sent many books to help start up the Bible school library (Brunk, Gerald).

Brunk was very prominent in the Mennonite community in Harrisonburg. Brunk was involved in Harmonia Sacra. He was also in many of the Mennonite music circles and some of the all-day singings. Brunk also did many things to help the Mennonite community in Harrisonburg. Brunk founded Calvary Mennonite Church and was also the very first pastor there. Calvary Mennonite Church was a much smaller crowd than Brunk's revival trips where he preached to thousands. Brunk also founded Warwick River Mennonite School. Previously Warwick River Mennonite School was held in the basement of Warwick River Mennonite Church, which was very inconvenient. Brunk was also the main editor for *Sword and Trumpet*. His father,

George R. Brunk I was the founder of *Sword and Trumpet* and his son was the main editor (Brunk Gerald).

George R. Brunk did many great things, and I would have loved to know him. During his lifetime he helped many people and did many things for the Lord. He was very important in teaching about faith and about the church. Brunk's works greatly influenced the community and left a good name for Mennonites.

Brunk, Gerald. Personal interview 4 Feb. 2015.

Brunk, Shirley. "George R. Brunk Jr.-The Early Years." 1991 MS.

"George Brunk II Dies; was Evangelist, Dean." EMU, Apr. 2002. Web. 22 June 2015.

Loewen, Royden and Nolt, Steven M. *Seeking Places of Peace*. Intercourse Pennsylvania: Good Books, 2012. Print.

Upper Room Revival

by Elwood E. Yoder

Trissels Mennonite Church Pastor Harold Miller recently heard snippets of a 1948 revival at Eastern Mennonite College, and he decided to invite four men who had been students at the time to speak about their memories of that event. After a Men's Bible Study in Harrisonburg at Park View Mennonite Church, March 15, 2016, which Pastor Miller taught, Myron Augsburg, Roy Kreider, Eugene Souder, and Paul Swarr spoke about a revival that they experienced and the way it impacted their lives.¹ A renewal story from sixty-eight years ago is more than academic—it may be instructive for the contemporary church and help provide a Spirit-led direction through the cross currents streaming through the Mennonite Church USA.

1. Harold N. Miller, Pastor at Trissels Mennonite Church, Broadway, Virginia, invited Myron Augsburg '55, Roy Krieder '51, Eugene Souder '51, and Paul Swarr '51.

The revival began with a Saturday morning prayer meeting, October 23, 1948.² Throughout the next week, students gathered for fervent prayer, sometimes long into the night, and they attended daily chapel services. The school had planned the week of revival, and encouragements appeared in the student newspaper to pray for these meetings.

J. Otis Yoder, revival week evangelist and a member of the EMC Bible faculty, called on students to pray for "a searching of the Holy Spirit," and to "let no unconfessed sin remain."³ During the October 24-31 revival meetings he invited students to prayer and encouraged new commitments. One morning during chapel the students shared publicly of their renewal experiences in their private prayer meetings the night before. Myron Augsburg remembers that the girls got up to share of their renewal experience before the boys could talk, and J. Otis Yoder never got to speak because the students took so much time.⁴

The revival had been facilitated because the students had a dedicated place to pray. Some years before the 1948 revival, books had been moved out of a third floor storage room in the Administration Building, and the secluded "upper room" was dedicated to prayer.⁵ Students and a few teachers prayed long into the night, confessing sin one to another and to God, and they sought renewal in their own lives, the EMC campus, and the wider church. Located above the men's dorm, a set of steps led to a small quiet room at the top, furnished with a circle of folding chairs.⁶

2. Yoder, J. Otis. "The Revivals Are Upon Us!" *Weather Vane* 9, no. 7 (October 21, 1948): 2.

3. Yoder, J. Otis. "Revivals Are Coming!" *Weather Vane* 9, no. 6 (October 14, 1948): 1.

4. Augsburg, Myron S. "Park View Mennonite Church Discussion." Interview. March 15, 2016.

5. Hubert R. Pellman, *Eastern Mennonite College, 1917-1967: A History* (Harrisonburg, VA: Eastern Mennonite College, 1967), 153.

6. Kreider, Roy, and Eugene K. Souder. *He Keeps Me Singing: A Four-year Journey with the Crusader Men's Quartet, 1947-1951*, Eastern Mennonite College. Grottoes, VA (13241 Port Republic Rd., Grottoes 24441): Eugene K. Souder, 2009, 20.



Pastor Harold Miller led a discussion at Park View Mennonite Church, March 15, 2016. From left, Paul Swarr, Eugene Souder, Roy Kreider, and Myron Augsburgberger.

Photo by Editor

While attending the school, Don Jacobs had used the upper room, and he informed Roy Kreider about the room and its efficacy in prayer, such that when the revival of 1948 took place, Kreider and others understood the importance of the room during the campus revival.⁷

Roy Kreider, twenty-three, wanted a deeper experience with God. Roy found a group of young men who were equally desirous of knowing God; and they wanted to take prayer seriously and the study of God's word. Kreider and others in the Upper Room had a spiritual hunger for things of God, and "we were being prepared for things beyond our knowing."⁸ Within five years of the revival Roy and his wife Florence began a pioneering service term in Israel, through Mennonite Board of Missions, that lasted over thirty years.

Dean of Women Evelyn E. King felt that "the Spirit of the Lord moved among us in a mighty way," and she experienced "the Lord in our midst through revelations of His power and faithfulness." She wrote in *Gospel Herald*

with the hope that "the revival fires still burning brightly on our campus" would "spread and grow throughout the Church of Jesus Christ."⁹

As a result of the revival, many of the students dedicated their lives to church work in the Mennonite denomination. Paul Swarr indicated that the majority of those students involved in the 1948 revival became pastors and missionaries.¹⁰ Aaron King and his wife Betty, for instance, did missions work in Latin America for many years, and Paul and Bertha Swarr served thirty years as missionaries in Israel.

Eugene Souder, vitally involved in the 1948 revival, and a member of the well-known Crusaders Quartet, has served a lifetime as a church planter, editor, and pastor in the Mennonite Church. Souder said the revival, while he was twenty-one, was a "move of the Spirit." Souder indicated that this revival did not happen because he and his college friends were involved and somehow spearheaded the event. Rather, God was at work, Souder concluded, in a mighty way, and it was God who moved through the lives of these college students, in their Upper Room prayer time, their chapel experiences, their studies, their music, and their commitment to serve the church in the United States and beyond.

Historians look for elements of continuity while observing the natural contours of change in church and society. The upper room prayer meetings of the students and teachers in 1948 reveals a continuity in the story of Christianity and the church that may help members of Mennonite Church USA find a way forward in the times of change now upon us.

7. Donald R. Jacobs, *What a Life!: A Memoir* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2012), 38.

8. Kreider, Roy H. "Park View Mennonite Church Discussion." Interview. March 15, 2016.

9. King, Evelyn E. "Eastern Mennonite College." *Gospel Herald* XLI, no. 46 (November 16, 1948): 1090.

10. Swarr, Paul L. "Park View Mennonite Church Discussion." Interview. March 15, 2016.



Lewis Martin spoke to participants on a Tour, sponsored by the Historians, September 10, 2016, at Pleasant View Old Order Mennonite Church. Watch for more photos and details about the Tour in the next issue of *Historian*.

Photo by Editor

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

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Forthcoming *Historian* Topics:
History of Mt. Carmel School
Photos from Old Order Mennonite
Tour in September 2016

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

On the cover is a photo of Ridgeview Old Order Mennonite Church, Mt. Clinton Pike, Harrisonburg, Virginia, taken by the Editor in 2015.

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 jamesrush@comcast.net, phone 540-434-0792, or U.S. mail to James Rush, 780 Parkwood Drive, Harrisonburg, Virginia, 22802.

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