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INFLUENCE OF DANIEL AND MAGDALENE LEHMAN FAMILY

For several years James Rush has asked Harold D. Lehman to write an article about the influence of his uncles and aunts in Virginia. In this issue we are glad to publish the results of Harold's work. The EMU Hartzler Library catalog shows many essays and writings by Harold, including his 2003 book on the history of Park View Mennonite Church, Harrisonburg.

Harold D. Lehman served in Civilian Public Service during WWII, and has been a long-term educator in Virginia. Harold and his wife Ruth Lehman served as Editors of *Historian*, 1998-2002.

In this issue we feature an article from Evan Knappenberger and a review of a drama by Evan's wife Rachel Knappenberger. Evan takes a new look at consequences of the Civil War through the lens of Jacob Wenger (1843-1925). Evan is a student at Eastern Mennonite Seminary, Harrisonburg. At the Editor's request, Rachel and Evan attended the recent musical drama presented by Calvary Christian Academy, Mt. Clinton.

We also feature an article written by Glendon Blosser about the history of Riverside Church in West Virginia.

Established in 1913, the congregation left Virginia Mennonite Conference in 2015.

Please reserve Saturday, November 12, 2016, 9:30 a.m., for our annual Historians meeting. Jan and Sam Showalter will talk about their Showalter family trip to Europe.

OLD ORDER MENNONITE COMMUNITY TOUR
SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 10, 2016
8:30 A.M.-2:00 P.M.

SPONSORED BY SHENANDOAH MENNONITE HISTORIANS
TOUR GUIDE: PHIL KNISS
VISIT PLEASANT VIEW MENNONITE CHURCH, MOUNTAIN VIEW SCHOOL, BURKHOLDER BUGGY SHOP, AND A MEAL AT JANET SHANK'S HOME
CONTACT JIM HERSHBERGER FOR RESERVATIONS, 540-908-8005, OR E-MAIL AT JIMHERSH254@GMAIL.COM

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Daniel and Magdalene Lehman Family in Virginia

by Harold D. Lehman

Approximately one hundred years ago, four Lehman siblings moved to Harrisonburg, Va., from the fertile “garden spot” of Lancaster County, Pa. What brought them here? What influences and convictions were shared in the makings of a Mennonite school/college in the East a century ago?

The Lehman quartet of two women and two men were children in the Bishop Daniel N. (1852-1925) and Magdalene Kendig (1853-1943) Lehman family from Millersville, Pa.

John Ruth, historian of Lancaster Mennonite Conference, describes the D.N. Lehman family as “piety in a progressive home.... There was always music in the family.... Father Daniel N. once brought home in his market wagon a parlor organ.¹ In the family were accomplished performers in organ, piano, auto-harp and violin.

A majority of the nine children in the D.N. Lehman family followed their father’s example by enrolling in and graduating from the Millersville State Teacher’s College in their village. The next step was to teach in a local public school. Only Daniel and Chester went to graduate studies in their respective fields of education and theology.²

Daughter Elizabeth (1890-1978) was the first in the Lehman family to come to this fledgling church school at Harrisonburg, Va. In the autumn of 1919 she taught English in an old building in Park Woods. By the spring of 1920 she became engaged to John Kurtz, who had supervised the construction of the

original Eastern Mennonite School building, nicknamed the “cracker box.” Elizabeth became the mother of five girls; the Kurtz family lived in the first house built on South College Avenue. John was ordained pastor in 1934, serving small mission churches in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Daniel Webster Lehman (1893-1970), wife Ada, and baby Harold came to Harrisonburg in time for the fall semester in 1921. Daniel was a versatile teacher, outdoorsman, and musician. He was ordained minister in Middle District in 1945 and bishop in 1947. For many years D.W. was the lone professor of education at Eastern Mennonite School/College and a “singing school” instructor across the United States.

Chester Kindig Lehman (1895-1980) and his wife Myra also moved to the EMS community in 1921. Chester was trained in theology, served EMS/C as Academic Dean, was Bible New Testament professor, and director of Mixed Chorus. Ordained in 1929, C.K. served as pastor at Mt. Clinton congregation. His forte was Biblical scholarship.

Ana May (Annie) (1878-1959) was the oldest child in the D.N. Lehman family. She moved to Harrisonburg in 1923 when her husband Amos Daniel Wenger was appointed as the second president of Eastern Mennonite School. A.D., already active in the negotiations of the new school, had moved his family from Lancaster County, Pa., to the Fentress, Va., community in 1908.

The A.D. Wenger home on the EMS campus was called Berea Cottage on the southwest corner of Park Woods. Until A.D.’s death in 1935, the Wenger family moved back to their Fentress home for the Christmas and summer vacations. Annie enrolled in the two-year Elementary Bible Course, graduating with the class of 1927 at age 50.

1. John L. Ruth, *The Earth is the Lord's* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 2001), 663.

2. Many factual details can be found in Lois M. Lehman and Rhoda E. Cressman’s 2014 book, *A. D. & Annie : stories, letters, and memories of A. D. Wenger and Annie Lehman Wenger, their families and their descendants.*

What caused one Lancaster County family to have such a deep-seeded effect on Eastern Mennonite School and College? One brother-in-law was an early president. A sister was an early teacher and married the man who built the school's central headquarters. One brother taught the first college courses offered at EMS; another brother became a longtime academic dean of the college. Perhaps an answer is that their father Daniel N. Lehman sensed that the public institution of higher education at Millersville could play a positive role in the education of him and his family and the preparation of Mennonites for higher education. Millersville State Teacher College's education program fit well with emerging Mennonite ideals that teaching might be an approved service occupation. Certainly other Millersville graduates were important early faculty members at EMS, including Maurice T. (M.T.) Brackbill and Dorothy C. Kemrer.

Then, too, the lingering effects of the Civil War may have had an impact. EMS was started only about fifty years after the Civil War ended, and the economic devastation of the Shenandoah Valley was relatively recent. Lancaster County families such as D.N. Lehman's had survived the war relatively unscathed in the North and most likely had more economic wherewithal to make higher education a possibility. For the most part, they found that Virginia Mennonites were ready to grant them opportunities as ministers and bishops in their churches as well as early leadership in the new school in Virginia, despite some minor tensions over the family's appreciation and ownership of musical instruments, not then approved in Virginia.

Yet, whatever the recipe, the relationship between one Lancaster family and the fledgling institution for higher learning in Harrisonburg seems to have made for a mutually beneficial

blend for both the new Eastern Mennonite School/College and the D.N. Lehman family from Lancaster County.

New Take on an Old War: Valley Mennonites and the Lingering Consequences of the Civil War

by Evan K. Knappenberger

The effects of the Civil War on the Virginia Mennonite community are still echoing through the Shenandoah. In 1861, the small, clannish group of Mennonites resident in the valley were shocked into a new reality in the form of Confederate conscription. Before they were eventually granted a paid-exemption status from the Virginia Legislature and the Confederate government, they had to endure serious persecution, and had to re-invent the Anabaptist notion of nonresistance in the midst of terrible suffering and poverty. They did this with an eye looking backwards, particularly through the *Martyrs Mirror*. As they braced themselves with the firm foundation of their nonresistant heritage, they were prevented from looking forward, however, by the



Rachel and Evan Knappenberger,

2016

smoke and fog of conflict. Even now, the scars and divisions of this 150-year old trauma are still visible in the modern Mennonite world.

Famously, when Confederate military officers came to Weavers Church to announce conscription at the beginning of the four-year struggle, there was no little commotion and emotion. This has been written about several times, most recently by Elwood Yoder in his history of Weavers Church, *How Firm a Foundation*, and by Robert Mullet, in his dramaturgy for Cavalry Christian Academy, *Armed with Courage: The Story of Christian Good*.¹ Both Yoder and Mullet do an excellent job of painting the picture of life in the 1860s: those forced to fight against their will, those oppressed as civilians by poverty and hardship in the wake of battle, and those who escaped the valley altogether. There are many well-documented histories of Virginia Mennonites from this time, from the purely historical (Harry A. Brunk, John L. Heatwole, David S. Rodes, Norman R. Wenger, Emmert F. Bittinger to name just a few,) as well as more re-imagined ones (e.g. Barbara Coffman). Additionally there is some material in the Menno Simons Historical Library at Eastern Mennonite University that has yet to be fully explored.

For example, I recently came across the story of Jacob Wenger (1843-1925) in the papers of his more-famous son, John Dan Wenger (b. 1871) while doing research on my wife's genealogy.² To fully recount the story of this branch of the Wenger clan would take some time, but a brief summary is certainly in order here, and can be easily related to both the Civil War experience of Virginia Mennonites, and also to the ongoing divisions in the

Mennonite church. It is also a fascinating story full of emotion and a little grit.

Jacob Wenger was born to Ephraim Wenger and Susanna Good Wenger in 1843. This would have made them close cousins to the Christian Good family as well as, through marriage, to the Heatwole, Coffman, Beery, Lehman and Weaver clans. Having not yet been baptized into the Mennonite church at the beginning of the war in 1861, young Jacob – barely a man at all – was among the large group (probably about 70 in number) of young men who tried to escape into the West but were captured by Confederate scouts. When the troops ordered them to surrender their weapons, they handed up their Bibles and the 1837 *Confession of Faith*. They were force-marched many long miles from the Moorefield area to Staunton, where they were put on a train for Richmond. Young Jacob Wenger was forced to stand in a cattle car ankle-deep in freezing and dirty water on this trip, the consequences of which he suffered from debilitating pain in his feet the rest of his life.

Put into prison in Richmond on bread ration along with his cousins and friends, Jacob was not given the same consideration that his fellow Mennonites were – he was not granted a conscientious release from service that many of the other men were, because he had not yet been baptized. And so he was forced into the Confederate army. During the battle of McDowell (May 8th, 1862) Jacob pretended to fire his weapon at the enemy, but lost heart for battle when a man standing near him was killed in action, and he himself nearly killed also. Faking an injury, Jacob managed to desert the Confederate army under Stonewall Jackson, and made his way down the Shenandoah on foot, crossing the Potomac at Williamsport.³ He spent the rest of the war driving a

1. See Rachel Knappenberger's review of Robert Mullet's play, below.

2. This is a very interesting file, including some sermons, histories, and an alternative account of the Sunday school conflict. The specific paper referenced here is: Wenger, J.D. "John Daniel Wenger, 1871-1967." Untitled Essay. Vertical File Collection, Harrisonburg, Virginia: Menno Simons Historical Library, Eastern Mennonite University, n.d.

3. Ibid, p. 2.

mule team for relatives in Pennsylvania. When the war was over, he walked home; when he saw Mole Hill coming up in the distance, he could not help but give a shout for joy!

Back home, Jacob Wenger found his family – the Good clan was planted firmly between Mole Hill, Mount Clinton, and Singers Glen, with Christian Good on the slopes of Mole Hill; the Wengers still farther East towards Linville-Edom, and in Dayton. The story is unclear here as to the specifics, but Jacob rented land near New Erection (Mount Clinton), feeling that he was owed an inheritance from his Good relatives, who alas, did not have any money to spare for him. Broke, and perhaps embittered, Jacob settled on cheaper land near the Coffmans on Dry River – land which was said to be poor in quality, and prone to flooding. He married Priscilla Geil in 1866, and built his family a homestead by hand. In 1871, Priscilla gave birth to John Daniel Wenger, who would go on to be bishop of the Old Order (Wenger) Mennonites after 1910, a famous and conservative church leader.⁴

Jacob was a severe man to his family, as his descendants remembered him, he “did not spare the rod.” He held John Dan’s hand going into the church even as a teenaged boy. There was conflict within the Wenger clan (between Jacob and Ben Wenger) and with the Koogler clan as well – what was probably a result of cases of undiagnosed mental illness and post-traumatic stress on both sides. Here is where the story erupts in controversy. As a war veteran suffering from post-traumatic stress myself, as well as from lingering problems with my feet, I hesitate to underestimate the effects of such things on the conflicts which I find myself engaged in. Certainly, I have much sympathy for Jacob, even if he was harsh to his

family. Considering the fact that poor Jacob was not given the same conscientious considerations as some of his peers were in the Confederate army due to a religious technicality – that he felt cheated out of a share of inheritance while he was in service and in exile – that he was probably unwelcome in Confederate veteran circles due to his conscientious desertion, while simultaneously unable to connect with many non-veteran Mennonites – all of this paints a portrait of Jacob Wenger as isolated and unappreciated, his problems unacknowledged and his efforts somewhat unrewarded.

Some Mennonites—including a few of the real antagonists, in my opinion, those “carpetbaggers” from Pennsylvania⁵—came into a Rockingham Mennonite culture with their own conservative ideas of what proper religious behavior should look like at the same time that other Rockingham natives including much of the church leadership began aligning themselves with the moderate forces of Dwight Moody including John F. Funk in Elkhart, Indiana.⁶

Many of the Mennonites who had lived through the worst of the war, having tested the mettle of their pacifistic convictions, were split on these issues. Most of them chose a moderate perspective on religious conflict.⁷ This includes my wife’s ancestor, Isaac Good, a

5. Those from the North seeking to profit from war-despoiled lands and labor in the South after the war. My personal historiography of Shenandoah Mennonite culture is that the Rockingham-Augusta natives are mostly peaceable, moderate, and friendly, onto which successive waves of immigration from Pennsylvania and other parts (such as Virginia Beach) have tried to impose their own religious and social conservatism on the Valley natives.

6. A possible new take on the famous Mennonite publisher John F. Funk (1835-1930) comes from a pamphlet in the possession of Jacob Wenger’s descendant, Rev. Philip R. Wenger of Bank Church, Hinton, Virginia. John F. Funk was embroiled in controversy at the end of his life, was stripped of the publishing company which he founded and led, and late in life recanted of his “modernizing” influence on Anabaptists around the world. I intend to fully explore this pamphlet along with Rev. Wenger in the near future.

7. The enumeration of sides in the conflicts of the 1870’s-1904 was a subject of much debate. What those on the conservative side would have called “worldly” or “liberal” I label as moderate, because of their retention of Mennonite customs such as plain dress and nonresistance. The true “liberals” ended up, like my father-in-law’s great-grandfather, Michael A. Layman, buggy-builder and treasurer of Dayton, leaving the Mennonites altogether and moving into the Brethren churches.

4. John Dan Wenger also married Christian Good’s daughter Frannie, according to Robert Mullet, before the Old Order split of 1900. The schisms of the Mennonites crossed all sorts of family lines.

famous potter who worked with “Potter John” D. Heatwole and Emanuel Suter at the New Erection Pottery between what is now Cooks Creek Presbyterian Church and Singers Glen. Isaac Good was just a boy during the war, and cousin to both Jacob Wenger (Isaac’s mother was Anna Wenger, Jacob’s mother was Susanna Good) and to Christian Good.⁸ It would have been from Isaac Good’s family that Jacob Wenger would have unsuccessfully sought a share of inheritance. Also among those Mennonites on the moderate side of the religious conflicts were men like John S. Coffman, who organized a band of “singing carpenters” to rebuild agricultural infrastructure, along with Christian Good (who had also escaped out of the army after many sore trials and threats) and Lewis J. Heatwole, who as a boy survived the burnings and hunger of the war – these leaders were religious moderates willing to push the church in new directions while still remaining committed to the ideals of nonresistance and plain dress.⁹ This was not good enough for the conservatives in the community, including Israel Rohrer, “a plunger,”--a failed Pennsylvania foodstuff speculator--according to Harry Brunk, who introduced industrial farming methods to the valley after buying up a good deal of cheap land after the war.¹⁰

Also on the conservative side of the 25-year series of conflicts--battles over everything from Sunday school to tobacco to ordination--were our friends, Jacob Wenger and his family. In

8. Isaac Good (b. 1851) is patriarch of the Good-Wisman tribe; his son John Elmer Good married Nora Wisman (later Cox); they gave birth to John Snively Good, who became Brethren after serving in WWII, ran a service station south of Harrisonburg on Route 11 for many years. John Snively Good’s daughter Debbie Jean is my wife Rachel’s mother, and is married to Chuck Layman, who is descended from the first Lehman Mennonites who came to America in the 1730’s and Rockingham in the 1780’s.

9. I would include George R. Brunk (the first) in this group of moderates. GRB and D.O. Kauffman did not consider themselves liberal, but by the standards of Old Order contemporaries like John Dan Wenger, they were certainly not fully conservative either. For more on this, see my essay “Conservatism, Eastern Mennonite, and the Spirit of Progress” in the Menno Simons Historical Library, Sine Zine box.

10. Harry A. Brunk, *History of Mennonites in Virginia, 1900-1960*, Vol. II (Verona, VA: McClure Printing Company, 1972), 447-9.

the standard (“moderate”) scholarly history of Harry A. Brunk and most of those after him, the history of conflict starts with Sunday Schools in the 1870s and doesn’t end until the Old Order split of 1900. According to Brunk, Yoder, Mullet and others, the conflict stemmed from religious practice, modernizing churches and generational changes. The John Dan Wenger papers, however, offer another picture.

Bishop Sam Coffman, usually seen as a stolid, reliable and fatherly figure, according to John Dan Wenger wasn’t always so steadfast and loving. Once in church, to the Wenger family’s serious chagrin, Bishop Coffman publicly accused Jacob Wenger as having “the blackest of black marks of us all.” Wife Priscilla erupted in tears, son John Dan and the rest of the family was forever scarred; Bishop Geil, from the Northern District, had to come and see “the blackest of us” for himself.¹¹ Such an accusation is a serious problem, whether true or not, especially coming from a respectable Bishop. Whether this recounting is historically-accurate or not, the incident lives on in the telling down for five generations, as an example of the kind of misunderstanding that underlies the official narrative of why splits happen among Virginia Mennonites.

The story of Jacob Wenger, his trauma-infused life and the controversy surrounding him, is just one example of the kind of counter-history that has yet to be explored by delving into the conservative Virginia Mennonite circles. When I speak about Virginia Mennonite splits and dust-ups with Old Order Mennonites, they caution me to take the standard tellings with a grain of salt--there’s always two sides to every story, they say. Perhaps we have been deaf to some of these two-sided stories, which might cast our reliable heroes--Bishop

11. Wenger’s untitled essay (see note 2) p. 3. Also in this tale, the good Bishop Coffman is said to have relied on alcohol supplied by Jacob Wenger through his terminal illness in the mid 1890s.

Sam Coffman, L. J. Heatwole, Christian Good, George Brunk—in a light that is less flattering and more human. There is a real danger in re-igniting old blazes, but there is also the very real possibility of bridging gaps and creating peace and unity.

The power of history is obvious in our story: that young men like Christian Good, Jacob Wenger and Harry G. Brunk were able to maintain their pacifist convictions through so many trials and terrors of the 1860s is a testament to the historical imagination. As Robert Mullet points out, these boys were no stranger to the *Martyrs Mirror*; they had been steeped in the ways of their heritage before they were even baptized. And yet, for all its acumen in maintaining their distinctions in face of massive violence and upheaval, Virginia Mennonites failed to properly recognize and treat the wounds of those who suffered the most, like Jacob Wenger. Harry Brunk gives a long list in his history of those Virginia Mennonite property owners who filed claims with the Union commission for losses incurred during the war. There is much attention given to those who lost out and were then denied by stingy bureaucrats, but none at all to the plight of poor Jacob Wenger, who came home to a life of poverty, loneliness and perpetually-aching feet. And it was Jacob Wenger, his family, and others like him who split off from Virginia Conference to form their own denomination. The wounds of war, ignored, chasm into the future.

With the advent of a new generation of Virginia Mennonite historians, led by people like Elwood Yoder and Robert Mullet, we are lucky enough to be offered a new synthesis of ideas, genealogies and perspectives on the past that can intervene in the ongoing estrangement between factions of Virginia Mennonites since the civil war. There is a very real place for history in ecclesiology, and vice versa. After

all, we are still actually cousins—my wife, who did not grow up in a Mennonite church, can connect to John Dan Wenger and the small band of Old Orders that are still referred to by his name within 6 generations. Her forebears are buried next to the Heatwoles, Brunks, Lehmans, Weavers and Burkholders – and they belong to her as much as to any buggy-driving Old Order.

My hope here has been to present the story of Jacob Wenger as it relates to both the Civil War, and the historical conflict between Virginia Mennonites, as one small example of what is no doubt a vast countercurrent within the historical understanding of Valley Anabaptist heritage. I believe there are many such stories that have yet to surface—need to see the light of day in order to both round out our stories, and to bring us all closer together. May it be so.

Armed with Courage. The Story of Christian Good

Play by Robert Mullet and Calvary Christian Academy

Reviewed by Rachel Knappenberger

I first met my husband, Evan Knappenberger, on the Eastern Mennonite University campus. I was looking for the coffee shop. He led me from the library across the campus, bought my tea, and then to my amazement headed to class. When I'd asked why he couldn't skip class and sit with me, he replied that he had to go to Dr. Mary Sprunger's Mennonite History class and, as this was a favorite, skipping was not an option. Since then, he's learned about my Mennonite family roots, including the fact that my grandfather's grandfather was a cousin to Christian Good. He's admitted he might even have skipped Mennonite History class to talk to me over tea!

Heritage, specifically my heritage, is something I'm bringing up because the historic basis for Robert Mullet's play *Armed with Courage: the Story of Christian Good*, is what made it a familial experience. Indeed, the play had so much family, it was like a big reunion right there on the stage. The more I learn about my own Mennonite heritage, the more folks I meet who I learn have common ancestors, the more I realize that we're all one big Shenandoah Mennonite family. There is something gratifying and enduring about seeing people that you know you're related to, their story complete with their very own quoted words, embodied in a living actor portraying them on stage. These things make a good show even better; it's like coming home to one's own community.

Community is a guiding tenant of the Mennonite religious experience, and was a pil-

lar woven throughout the play. Time and time again, Christian Good (portrayed by Isaac Mullet) has his faith tested, and there is always a family member or friend there to reinforce him in that faith. Christian Good's mother, Elizabeth (played by Susanna Showalter) shares with him at the beginning of the play the strength of his Anabaptist ancestors whose stories are preserved in the *Martyrs Mirror*. She gives her now-famous son a lesson from that well-read old book. (While my husband and I received a gift of the *Martyrs Mirror* when we were married, still nothing compares to seeing a historic copy, like those on display at Crossroads: Valley Brethren Mennonite Heritage Center in Harrisonburg.) Another time, Bishop Samuel Coffman (played by William Byler) stands beside the young Christian Good as they watch the Valley burn together, and talk of the faith.

Robert Mullet's play, with its final performance on May 7, 2016, was very well done. As I sat in the school's gymnasium, facing the type of theater space typically found in school gyms, I expected to see the type of theater typically performed in schools. What I experienced was much more of a quality performance that not only showcased skillful student acting, but solid musicianship and well-rehearsed technical theater. Even though the four- and eight-part harmonies of Mennonite music are famously known, the cast of *Armed with Courage* did not disappoint. Characters sang as they walked up the aisles, they sang in front of the stage and on it. They played the piano, and guitar, and mandolin in between scenes, and they even reenacted the singing carpenters of John S. Coffman, in full boy choir harmony. The ending chorus was equally well-done. Special effects in the play were an unexpected delight. There was liquid smoke and decent lighting to give the impres-

sion of fire, which was a central element to the play set during the time of burning and war.

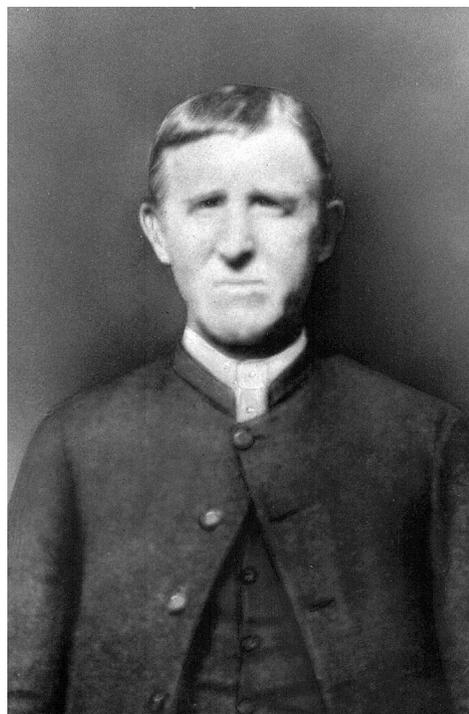
The play's program listed scenes headed by the year of their occurrence, indicating not a single scene, but vignettes clustered around a symbol of the main action of that year. This masterful production decision allowed a movement of storytelling and scene changes supplying energy to the play. As action in the story left the main area of the stage and ventured to other parts of the theater space, the play's momentum continued while scenes could be changed behind the closed stage curtain. This command of the theater space extended to the catwalk above the stage, where characters could stand "on Mole Hill."

A good portion of the audience was likely related to at least one character in the play. In whole or in part the story of Christian Good's refusal to fire his gun at humans – making him one of the first conscientious objectors in the Confederate army – is fairly well known among valley Mennonites. The play followed the path of Christian's life: from his younger years at the dawn of the Civil War, through that war; it moved through the second act, humorously portraying scenes from his circuit-riding days with Joseph Heatwole (played by Layne Stevanus), and culminating in now-old man Good's sharing his mother's wisdom with his own grandson, Lewis (played by Andrew Good), at the commencement of the first World War. He upholds the peaceful practice of Mennonites in a way that is gentle and faithful. The play is often painstakingly accurate, filled with historic dialog, but was far more than a living history lesson.

The power of Anabaptist belief is encapsulated in the words Christian passes on to Lewis in the play's final scene. "Don't be fearful," he says, "just focus on being faithful." These two final motifs in Mullet's play, faithfulness and

courage, are two of Christian Good's most important values. "May all that come behind us find us faithful," is the play's powerful closing refrain, sang endearingly in chorus. These are powerful words for us, the descendants of the Good and Heatwole families to remember.

Copies of the script and a DVD of the performance are available from Calvary Christian Academy, Mt. Clinton, Virginia, 540-867-9848, or e-mail ccaconnection@gmail.com.



Christian Good (1842-1916)
Photo from Al Good

Riverside Mennonite Church: Now the Riverside Appalachian Gospel Church

by Glendon Blosser

One of the older “Home Mission” churches in West Virginia has chosen to leave its former “historical nest” of ninety plus years to continue its witness of faith in a community nestled in the mountains of West Virginia along the winding roads of the Appalachian Mountains.¹ Riverside is a primary spot for a church building on Dry Fork River that has at times been



Riverside Mennonite Church, along the Dry Fork River of the Allegheny Mountains near Harman, West Virginia.

This building used 1935 - 1986.

Mennonite Community Photograph Collection, The Congregation (HM4-134 Box 1 photo 011.5-1). Mennonite Church USA Archives, Goshen, Indiana.

precarious. Three times in its history the river has reached flood stage and threatened the destruction of the building. “A major flood occurred in 1985 and the building had water up to the window sills and the benches were floating. The miracle of this flood was that a huge number of trees were floated against the building and saved the building from a total collapse.”²

Consistent with the first mission outreach efforts of the early Mennonites, preaching points were held in school buildings. Harry

1. Riverside withdrew from Virginia Mennonite Conference in 2015, having been established in 1913 as Dry Fork, and renamed Riverside in 1935.

2. Glendon Blosser, *Fifty Year History of Central District* (Printed EMU Print Shop, Harrisonburg, Va., 2013), 20.

Brunk in his history of Virginia Mennonite Volume II suggests that “services in that area had been held for many years in the Pennington Schoolhouse, which was located on the east side of Dry Fork, two miles north of Harman. Originally there was just one room, but in 1927 Hiram Weaver (a Middle District minister serving in West Virginia) built an additional room and the School Board paid for it. Double doors were placed between the two rooms and when revival meetings were held people were seated in both rooms and the minister stood at the doors.”³

The Riverside frame church building along the river was dedicated in August, 1935. Riverside became the largest congregation (76 in 1960) that Middle District started in the Allegheny Mountains of West Virginia. The Middle District Home Mission Board purchased a 120 acre farm to provide the pastor at Riverside a self-supporting arrangement for income. Farming in West Virginia has its limitations and that arrangement was discontinued in 1969 when Melvin Myers terminated his assignment as pastor. The farm was rented to a local farmer and a



Riverside Mennonite Church meetinghouse, West Virginia, 2013

Photo by Editor

3. Harry A. Brunk, *History of Mennonites in Virginia, 1900-1960*, Vol. II (Verona, VA: McClure Printing Company, 1972), 217.

campground was developed near the house by Central District as a witness to the area and a potential venue for youth and family groups to enjoy the out of doors and God's creation.

Robert and Lois Wenger were the last pastoral couple at Riverside to use the farm house for a residence and moved back to Virginia in 2005. In 2007 Robert was installed as a Central District Overseer and was given the oversight of the Riverside Mennonite Church. In this same year, Walter (Jerry) Sebastian, a local member of the congregation was installed as pastor. This arrangement for a community person to serve the pastoral role of the congregation changed the relationship of the congregation to Central District. Floyd Blosser, chair of the Central District Council, stated this as one reason for the congregation's leaving the Mennonite Church. "One contributing factor, as with many outlying congregations, was feelings of disconnect. Now that Eleanor Mininger has moved out of the area there are none of the former members present or persons of Mennonite heritage attending."⁴

Another reason that seems to have been a big factor in the decision of the congregation to leave the Mennonite Church is the impact of Eastern Mennonite University's decision regarding the homosexual issue. Another reason stated by Floyd, "the homosexual issue and especially the negative press over Eastern Mennonite University has dirtied the Mennonite name to the point that they felt it was detriment to their witness."⁵

Robert Wenger as the Overseer also noted this as, "probably one of the strongest factors, with a very strong evangelical presence in the congregation that could not make sense out of a church structure that either could not or would not exercise discipline on errant con-

gregations and conferences, particularly with the same-gender issues in the church. When the news of same-gender issues would come down the line and churches, conferences, and individuals were not 'disciplined' other than being declared 'in variance', it was viewed as a move by the denomination in a very wrong direction."⁶

The Riverside Appalachian Gospel Church has not aligned with any other organization and is hoping to connect more with the Lambert congregation, located on the next mountain west of the Dry Fork community. Lambert was a Mennonite church for years and has also asked to be released from the Virginia Mennonite Conference to become a community church.

This historical essay tends to be telling us that we still need to learn lessons from history about the relationship of congregations and church institutions. Also what does it mean to have relationships between congregations regardless of our distance, especially when travel and communications are simple in today's living? Or is the issue, how to provide meaningful relationships when the "tug and pull" of faith lacks a clear witness of salvation in Jesus Christ?

4. Floyd Blosser, Correspondence, May 2016

5. Ibid.

6. Robert Wenger, Correspondence, May 2016



Officers of the Shenandoah Valley Mennonite Historians, at a meeting March 29, 2016. Back row, from left, James Rush, Dr. Gerald R. Brunk, Lois Bowman. Front row, from left, Elwood Yoder, Jim Hershberger, and Sheldon "Pete" Burkholder.

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- 1948 Revival at Eastern Mennonite College
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If you have an idea for an article or picture for the *Historian*, contact the Editor at elyoder@gmail.com.

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On the cover is a photo of Mt. Clinton Mennonite Church, 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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