



# Shenandoah Mennonite Historian

Volume 23, No. 3  
Summer, 2015

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*

## THREE COUPLES--ONE PURPOSE

In this issue Paul L. Kratz offers an inspiring story about three couples who served as mission workers in West Virginia churches during the height of Middle District twentieth century outreach endeavors. Paul's story includes three couples, Warren Kratz (1899-1968) and Esther Newcomer (1896-1927), Leonard Martin (1905-1930) and Mary Wenger (1903-1976), and finally Warren Kratz, who married Mary Wenger. The story is a testimony of commitment to missions by Virginia Conference Mennonites among churches in West Virginia.

Paul L. Kratz was born in 1938 to Warren and Mary Kratz. Paul, researcher and writer of this issue's feature article, was ordained in 1962 and served as an Overseer in the Central District of Virginia Mennonite Conference, 1992-2007. Paul and Evelyn Kratz have served as overseas missionaries, Paul has worked as a pastor in three churches, for seven years he was Editor of *The Sword and Trumpet*, and he has volunteered in a variety of capacities in the Virginia Mennonite Conference and Virginia Mission Board.

### *Vera's Journey Tour*

Vera Heatwole's life will be featured in a tour sponsored by the Shenandoah Valley Mennonite Historians, Saturday, July 25, 2015, 9:00-11:15 AM. Vera's granddaughter Kathy Rhodes and others will be our guides and storytellers. Glendon Blosser will also be along to add Virginia Middle District history. The cost for the tour is \$12 per person for members of the Shenandoah Valley Mennonite Historians and \$14 for non-members. To register call Jim Hershberger at 540-908-8005 or e-mail him at jimhersh254@gmail.com. Send checks to Jim Hershberger, 5647 Wengers Mill Road, Linville, VA, 22834.

#### IN THIS ISSUE:

- EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION
- "THREE COUPLES--ONE PURPOSE," BY PAUL L. KRATZ
- TOPICS FOR FUTURE ISSUES

## Three Couples--One Purpose

by Paul L. Kratz

While most American Mennonites were basking in the comfort of religious freedom, the call of the Great Commission moved Bishop Martin Burkholder and Bishop Samuel Coffman, beginning around 1858, to cross the mountains by horseback west of the Shenandoah Valley to share their faith with people they had not known before. In 1861 the Civil War broke out and raged for four years. In the middle of the battle, in 1863, the western part of Virginia became a separate state recognized as West Virginia.

Other Mennonite ministers from the Shenandoah Valley caught the vision of Burkholder and Coffman and supported the effort by traveling into West Virginia at their own expense to pursue these and other leads. They held meetings in homes, schools and other meeting places. Hearts responded, and gradually, churches began to emerge.

In 1893, the Middle District formed a Home Mission Board to help give direction to the evangelistic efforts in West Virginia.

Twenty-four years later Eastern Mennonite School was established (1917), and young folks from many places were attracted to its emphasis on biblical studies and missions, both locally and overseas.

Among those who responded were Warren Kratz and Esther Newcomer, who learned to know each other in that setting. Warren had been the first student to have come from Franconia Conference, Hatfield, Pennsylvania. Esther was from Lancaster Conference,



Esther Newcomer and Warren Kratz wedding photo, August 21, 1923.

Paul L. Kratz collection

Salunga, Pennsylvania. After graduating, they married on August 21, 1923, and immediately moved to Whitmer, West Virginia, where they participated in the Mennonite Sunday schools and church outreach efforts throughout the area. At the same time they took teaching positions in the local schools of Horton and Whitmer (twin towns), with the intent of giving a witness for Christ in those settings. After serving in this way for four years, Warren was asked to return to EMS as Dean of Men. But



Warren and Esther (Newcomer) Kratz at their West Virginia home.

Paul L. Kratz collection

during the process of moving and building a house in Park View, Esther contracted a disease identified as creeping paralysis and died July 27, 1927.

Two years later, in 1929, a second couple married and moved to West Virginia with similar ambitions. Leonard Martin, who with his parents had moved from Hagerstown, Maryland, to the Harrisonburg community, became members of Weavers Mennonite Church. Leonard attended EMS where he met Mary Wenger, daughter of A. D. Wenger, the second president of EMS. Mary had been born near Millersville, Pennsylvania, but grew up in Fentress, Virginia (now Chesapeake). Both were graduates of EMS, but Mary took further studies at Millersville Normal School, in Pennsylvania, and then graduated from Goshen College in Indiana in 1924. Both, at different times, taught school near Hagerstown, Maryland. Mary also taught a couple of years at EMS. Leonard and she were married August 29, 1929, and immediately moved to the Whitmer area to teach school and immerse themselves in the work of the Mennonite Church and witness in that area, but their service together was short-lived. They delayed their honeymoon ten months until Mary's sister, Anna May, married John Garber.

The two couples had planned to take their honeymoons together in Florida. Unfortunately, while swimming at a beach, Anna May got into trouble, and called for Leonard, a good swimmer, to help her. But somehow, in the process of trying to save her, he lost his own life.

After some time of widowhood, Warren and Mary became interested in each other and were married July 2, 1932. With an ongoing



**Leonard Martin and Mary Wenger wedding photo, August 29, 1929.**

Paul L. Kratz collection

commitment to missions, and with hearts for the people of West Virginia, they immediately began again in Whitmer, teaching to make a living and being deeply involved in the life of the church.

In this way they resumed supporting themselves by teaching school and cooperating with the Middle District Mission Board and the



**Leonard and Mary (Wenger) Martin at their West Virginia home.**

Paul L. Kratz collection



Warren and Mary (Wenger Martin) Kratz, wedding photo July 2, 1932.  
Paul L. Kratz collection

emerging church in ministering to the young folks and families in the area. Their letters mention numerous visitations by mission board personnel. Often visiting ministers from the Shenandoah Valley would stay in their home when they came to preach in the West Virginia churches.

Whitmer had been the location of West Virginia's largest sawmill, but by the 1930's the lumber boom had about run its course. With the closing of the sawmill, many workers sought employment elsewhere, taking their families with them. There was a pronounced economic decline throughout the area, and some schools were

closed.

This turn of events, plus the arrival of their first child, Joanne, in 1933, influenced both Warren and Mary to discontinue teaching school. Warren also felt the need for more flexibility with the beginning of the family, so he became a salesman for McNess and other similar products. He drove house-to-house up and down Gandy Creek, which flowed below their house, and throughout the mountains of Randolph and Pendleton Counties. Wherever he went he freely shared his faith, often left portions of Scripture and/or tracts when he felt it was appropriate.

So that they could continue being significantly involved in the life of the church, Warren and Mary engaged young single women from the churches in the Shenandoah Valley, EMS, and elsewhere who made themselves available for limited periods of time to live in the Kratz home and help with the children. These were often referred to as, "missionary sisters." Wilma Lehman served thus from 1935-1937; Grace Metzler from 1938-1939; and Mary Hertzler after that. Numerous mis-



Warren and Mary (Wenger Martin) Kratz on the steps of their West Virginia home.

Paul L. Kratz collection



Mary (Wenger Martin) and Warren Kratz, about 1965.  
Paul L. Kratz collection

sionary sisters also served in other missionary homes in West Virginia, helping in a similar fashion and also contributing to the life of the churches. The Middle District Mission Board supported these missionary sisters in the late 1930s with a stipend of \$20 per summer or \$2.50 per month over and above expenses, according to Harry Brunk.<sup>1</sup> However, in one of her letters, Mary mentioned that they themselves were paying those who worked for them in an effort to help the mission board out.

During those years changes came to the Kratz family. Ruby was born in 1936, and Paul in 1938. In 1940, Joanne began attending school, but it did not take a full year for Warren and Mary to realize that her teacher may only have had a high school education herself and had no training as a teacher. Furthermore, she was not effective as a teacher. This presented a dilemma for them. They wanted to remain in West Virginia, but they also wanted their children to receive a good education. Finally, they decided to move to Harrisonburg, which they did in the spring of 1941.

<sup>1</sup> Harry A. Brunk, *History of Mennonites in Virginia, 1900-1960*, Vol. II (Verona, Virginia: McClure Printing Company, Inc. 1972), 215.

A year later, Warren was ordained as a minister. He had been urged to accept ordination some years earlier, for the work in West Virginia, but did not feel to do so at that time without the use of the lot. Now he was immediately assigned to Temple Hill Mennonite Church across the Blue Ridge for a year, then to Gay Street Mission for two years. During that time a building was built and the name was changed to Broad Street Mennonite Church. From 1945 to 1952 he served as pastor of the Pike Mennonite Church, along with Aldine Brenneman as co-pastor. From 1953 to 1956, he pastored the Mt. Hermon Mennonite Church in Mutton Hollow—again on the eastern side of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

While Warren was a pastor at Pike, he was expected to preach twice a month there, while at the same time he was put on “the calendar” of Middle District. This meant that on the Sundays he did not preach at the Pike, he was usually scheduled to preach at another church within the district, including the churches in



Warren Kratz (right) and a fifth grade class of boys at Whitmer school building, formerly a “lock-up” (temporary jail).

Paul L. Kratz collection



Warren Kratz (right) and a class of boys outside the Whitmer “lock-up.”

Paul L. Kratz collection

West Virginia. Occasionally he would preach on Sunday mornings at Eastern Mennonite School or one of the Civilian Public Service (CPS) camps in the region. This was the pattern for all the district ministers in the “home congregations.” Once in a while Warren was invited to preach in another church in another district of Virginia Conference.

While they were living near Harrisonburg, Warren and Mary established a Christian Day School on their farm on what is now Pear Street. It was known as Mt. Carmel Parochial School. Mary was the principle and teacher for all the grades. Warren assisted with some Bible classes. Ira Miller would often bring students in the educational track from Eastern Mennonite College to observe. After several years a second room was added, as well as a second teacher. The school was closed in 1956.

In the summer of 1957, the Middle District Mission Board asked Warren and Mary to return

to West Virginia. Their immediate response was positive. That was really where their hearts were. Since their children were basically “out of the nest,” they felt free to go. So within a month they had moved to West Virginia!

This was a third beginning in West Virginia for both Warren and Mary. Warren became pastor of Lambert Mennonite Church from 1957 to 1958. Then for the next decade he pastored two churches—the Lanesville Mennonite Church (now “Lan-ville”) and Horton Mennonite Church in Whitmer. This usually called for him to teach Sunday school, and to preach twice each Sunday—in the morning at Lanesville and in the afternoon at Horton. In addition, there were regular prayer meetings and Bible studies on week nights. Together he and Mary also did a lot of visitation and counseling. This was the pattern until Warren died suddenly after shoveling snow January 8, 1968.



Esther (Newcomer) Kratz with one of her classes in West Virginia.

Paul L. Kratz collection



Mary Kratz (back row, third adult from right) with Summer Bible School teachers and classes at Horton Mennonite Church, West Virginia about 1940.

Paul L. Kratz collection

Mary soon moved to Harrisonburg to be near her children. When asked in her latter years why she thought it was that the witness she and Warren had so given their hearts to, attracted a significant number of young folks, and changed a lot of lives, yet the churches neither became large nor produced many native leaders. Her response was that as young folks became followers of Jesus, a fire was lit in them that made them want to do better than their forbearers, who, because of the depressed situation in their surroundings, had succumbed to living off of government



Lanesville Mennonite Church, 1950s. Warren Kratz worked here as a pastor for a decade in the late 1950s and '60s.

Harry A. Brunk collection, VMC Archives

subsidies. Thus there was a steady stream of young folks migrating to the Shenandoah Valley, South Eastern Virginia, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and other places where they could do better economically. Many of them and their descendants retained membership in the Mennonite Church in their new settings. Mary died on October 19, 1976.

Thus, these three couples joined the effort to share Jesus Christ in West Virginia, having definitely felt that this was what God had called them to do.



Former Lanesville Mennonite Church, West Virginia,

2012.

Elwood E. Yoder collection



**Mt. Hermon Mennonite Church**, pictured on the front cover, is located along Mutton Hollow Rd., off Spotswood Trail (Route 33), Stanardsville, in Greene County, Virginia. It is a member of the Southeastern Mennonite Conference. Warren Kratz was a pastor at Mt. Hermon Mennonite Church 1953-1956.

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

Officers of the Historians:

Chair, Jim Hershberger

Treasurer, Sheldon "Pete" Burkholder

Secretary, James Rush

Lois Bowman

Gerald R. Brunk

Elwood E. Yoder, Editor

Forthcoming *Historian* Topics in 2015:

- George Brunk II's great-grandsons write essays about his life
- Songs used in the Brunk revival tent meetings
- Directory of Mennonites and Anabaptist Groups in Virginia

If you have an idea for an article or picture for the *Historian*, contact the Editor at [elyoder@gmail.com](mailto:elyoder@gmail.com).

Past issues of the *Shenandoah Mennonite Historian* can be found in PDF format at [http://mennonitearchivesofvirginia.net/Shenandoah\\_Historian.html](http://mennonitearchivesofvirginia.net/Shenandoah_Historian.html)

On the cover is a photo of Mt. Hermon Mennonite Church taken by Elwood E. Yoder, in 2014.

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

Shenandoah Valley Mennonite Historians  
780 Parkwood Drive  
Harrisonburg, VA 22802