



Vol. 20, No. 4

*Quarterly Publication of the Shenandoah Valley Mennonite Historians*

Autumn 2012

## ARCHIVES AS MINISTRY?

*Colleen McFarland is the archivist for MC USA, the largest group of Mennonites in the U.S. In the October 2012 issue of the Lancaster Mennonite Historical Society publication **the MIRROR** she has a fine article with the above title. With permission we do some quoting from her thoughtful piece. Thus more people can get the benefit of her ideas on how an archives can be viewed as contributing to the work of the church and the Kingdom of God.*

Her career as a librarian put her in touch with people needing reference help when they came to a library and wanted documents that were primary sources—“first-hand accounts of historical events or phenomena that are the backbone of the study of history.”

What she enjoyed most were people’s stories from the past as told in diaries, life narratives, oral histories done by interview or correspondence. She learned that historical documents were like visiting people from another country or culture or helping researchers to welcome strangers “into their minds and hearts,” like “facilitating radical hospitality.” She loved it when “researchers laugh with, cry for, or express outrage on behalf of the stranger” they were studying.

“I know something amazing has occurred when a student researcher simply cannot stop reading old letters or diaries—despite the difficult handwriting and funny spellings—because they have to know how things turn out in the end.”

She saw it as “bringing new life to the dead. I love honoring them simply for having lived and gone through all that living entails. I love the exposure of the silent (or sometimes not so silent) injustices they experienced and committed, and I love holding the hope that they know the belated work of reconciliation has begun.”

“The beautiful, complicated, and messy place where this important work happens—where the living and the departed comingle, where the Communion of Saints is almost palpable—is the archives.”

[continued on page 2]

[From front cover]

Thus she experiences the “miracle of Christian community formed across time.”

The editor of *SMH* was a librarian and an archivist for many years and has experienced what Colleen is talking about.

We continue with more quotes. “So, what exactly is an archives?” It is a collection “of unpublished documents. It may hold the non-current records of an organization, institution, or corporation, such as meeting minutes and annual reports. It may hold manuscripts, donated by private individuals and families, including diaries, letters, and scrapbooks.”

“It may hold nontextual documents, films, photographs and oral history interviews.” The challenge these days is figuring out how to collect blogs, e-mail and digital documents.

Hopefully, the archives provides “access to nearly everything we collect. The openness of archives has been critically important to Mennonite history.”

Many congregations tend to treat their own history superficially. The editor of *SMH* has researched and written eight congregational and community histories. They include many stories and traditions. Sometimes it took a little convincing to get a congregation or community to invest money for such a project.

When the finished product with pictures was published, invariably people turned first to see what photographs were included. I have never heard of a congregation or community that expressed regret for having put money in such a book project.

Thanks, Colleen, for the thoughtful reminder that what an archives does is part of the ongoing ministry of the church.

J. O. Lehman

## FROM FAITH TO FLICKR

That’s the title Colleen McFarland, archivist for Mennonite Church USA, plans to use for the 11<sup>th</sup> annual Kennel Charles Anabaptist lecture in the Eastern Mennonite School auditorium on Saturday, October 27, 2012 at 11:00 a.m..

It will be a discussion about access to and preservation of Anabaptist historical research materials in the digital age.

For two hours previous to that lecture the high school history department will conduct a Photo Harvest, where community people are invited to bring photos to be scanned and included on the projected new initiative:

**MENNONITE ARCHIVES OF VIRGINIA**, a digital repository about Mennonite faith, life, and history in Virginia and surrounding states. See page 4.

You are invited to bring your photos to this event. If you have questions, please contact Elwood Yoder, history teacher at EMS. 434-4873 home #

# MENNONITE ARCHIVES OF VIRGINIA

Photographs will likely serve as the primary means of historical storytelling in the twenty-first century. With a good caption, photos provide context, information, and perspective in ways that sentences and paragraphs cannot. A crisp, clear photograph tells a story, reveals culture, and stimulates interest in history.

I've deliberately included photos in my research and writings projects in recent years. In my work as a high school teacher of history and Bible I've learned that photos create the visuals that young people expect and often need in order to learn history.

While interpretive historical writing remains essential today, a well-placed photograph on a page amidst words and paragraphs provides understanding that often goes beyond what words can convey.

Photos have rapidly become the means of communication in our time. The proliferation of millions of photos on social media sites leaves me wondering if anything is private about our lives anymore. When my students take interesting pictures, they immediately begin thinking of ways to publish them on the Internet to show their friends.

Likewise, when we pull out an aging family album and laugh at the old pictures, conversations bubble up with bygone memories, and young and old are soon telling stories from the past—the essence of history.

*Shenandoah Mennonite Historian* / Autumn 2012 / 3

In the pre-modern era before Gutenberg's printing press, visuals in stained glass or cathedrals were often the way people learned about their history. Now we live in a post-modern era that is represented by the Internet, the World Wide Web, and social media sites, where pictures and visuals again carry the primary weight of historical storytelling, like in the pre-modern era.

My professional emphasis on photos has emerged over thirty years of teaching history to teenagers and from research and writing projects in recent years. All of this has coalesced into a new digital photo repository called **Menmonite Archives of Virginia**.

The idea for this photo project was sparked by the upcoming centennial of Eastern Mennonite School in which scanning and digitizing photos seemed like a good way to show the school's history to the community and alumni scattered around the world.

My work with the Shenandoah Valley Mennonite Historians, especially the research on Bishop Martin Burkholder, has also created a foundation for this new digital repository of images about Mennonites in Virginia and surrounding states. Finally, the Virginia Mennonite Conference Historical Committee and Archives embraced this new digital Mennonite archive.

The scanning of photographs, the decisions about how to store photos and display them, the creation of good metadata to accompany photos, all of this takes time to develop. Over the next number of years I hope to use students and volunteers to scan and digitize many photographs from the archives of Eastern

Mennonite School and the Virginia Mennonite Conference Archives, as well as photos from private collections when donors agree to display their photos on the Internet. The Shenandoah Valley Mennonite Historians have funded the initial expenses of these digital archives.

Some years ago, while researching the history of the Zion Mennonite Church, Broadway, Virginia, I sat with a senior member of the congregation and talked about Mennonite history in Virginia.

Martha Shank Whissen, with an excellent memory of her early years among Virginia Mennonites, schooled me in the burning of her grandparents' barn and house during the Civil War, taught me about the mountain preaching circuits of her preacher father, showed her 19<sup>th</sup> century *Hymns and Tunes* songbook, pointed out her collectibles, and then opened up her treasure trove of photographs.

Martha helped me to "see" Virginia Mennonite history through her crisp, small, black and white photos. I came to realize the distinct southern character of Virginia Mennonites, their unique situation in the former Confederacy, and the ways Mennonite culture in Virginia emerged in different patterns from the Pennsylvania and Ohio families who moved into the Valley when Martha began attending Eastern Mennonite School in the early twentieth century. I owe a great debt to Martha and other gentle Virginia Mennonites who have shared their photographs and stories with me.

**Mennonite Archives of Virginia** is an attempt to collect photos that tell an Anabaptist story in Virginia and to display them on Internet, the new archives of this century.

Our web site:

([www.mennonitearchivesofvirginia.net](http://www.mennonitearchivesofvirginia.net))

and the accompanying repository on flickr.com where the photos are stored will both allow for comments and more information for the viewer to include with the online photos.

The historian needs to dig into paper archives, seek primary sources, conduct interviews, and attempt to interpret the past. The discovery of a great photograph, however, can enliven the historical narrative with details that help make history clear, understandable, and fun.

Elwood E. Yoder



## Virginia Mennonite Conference Votes to Become Full Member of the New Integrated Mennonite Church USA

At the historic meeting of Virginia Conference delegates at Springdale Mennonite Church on Jan. 26, by a vote of 84%, Virginia Mennonite Conference voted to become a charter member of the Mennonite Church USA.

At the beautiful spring-like sunshiny day, not all was sunshine, however. There was pain involved too. Five congregations are in the process of leaving the conference. That caused some dismay and concern.

There was a sense of anticipation among delegates and visitors as the church was packed with more delegates and visitors than usually attend the midwinter meeting. Conference minister and executive, Owen Burkholder, first held a devotional and several songs were sung.

The first action taken was to accept "with regret" the request of Faith Mennonite Church of South Boston, VA to withdraw from conference. The congregation was no longer comfortable with the directions conference was going. In the discussion period Loren Horst was one of the first to express "sadness" to see this separation occur.

The remainder of the morning was spent in discussing the main topic of the day: "Resolved that Virginia Mennonite Conference affirm its commitment to full membership in Mennonite Church USA." Several dozen delegates discussed the pros and cons as the issue was discussed sensitively. Everyone knew that if that resolution passed, it meant that the Mountain Valley District of four churches (Bethel, Dayton, Morning View and Salem) would also withdraw from conference.

Enough pain was expressed that a vote indicating readiness to vote showed that they were not ready! So the original resolution was tabled and a vote taken on the motion "that Virginia Conference not join MC USA." That motion lost by 159 to 34.

Then it was time to take the original resolution (that Conference become a full member of MC USA) off the table again. By ballot vote, the delegates solemnly voted on the original recommendation to join. This most significant vote resulted in 195 ballots being cast, 156 voting "yes" and 29 voting "no," with 10 abstentions.

After it was announced that 84% had voted in favor of Virginia Conference becoming a full charter member of Mennonite Church USA, there was a period of quietness

and silent prayer, followed by singing #418, "Move In Our Midst."

After that, George R. Brunk III gave his "Reflections." He had been moderator of Mennonite General Assembly rather early in the nineteen-year merger process and had helped nudge the integration process of the Mennonite Church and General Conference Mennonite Church.

George spoke eloquently. In his early involvement he felt this to be God's plan and that it had integrity. Now what does it mean? He likened this action and much future work to a flowing river with many bends. Now we've just "rounded one big bend." But he noted it was painful that not everyone had "made it around this bend." What all that means still remains to be seen.

He observed that Virginia had historically been a leader in the larger Mennonite General Conference, for example, the 1921 Mennonite Confession of Faith had first been a Virginia confession of faith. He characterized Virginia Conference as having in the past proceeded with "conservative optimism" (moved with creativity and self-confidence, but conservatively).

Now Virginia Conference continues to have the opportunity to be a part of the larger church leadership. New opportunities will present themselves, and he hoped we would not "renege on our history" in the future.

He referred back to Anabaptist days and noted the search for balance "between the two poles of purity and unity." There are exciting days ahead. "God is a God of the future and a God of hope." Let us grasp the opportunities "with hope and optimism," with the realization that many more bends in the river await us.

One other vote was taken regarding a new membership category for congregations that might wish to stay in Virginia Conference, but not be a part of MC USA. That vote resulted in 123 "yes" and 47 "no," thus failing to pass by a few percentage points short of 75%.

The historic day ended after some singing, the expression of mixed emotions of pain and excitement of what the future may hold, and a sober realization that much work remains to be done to discern direction and work through the details of the day's actions.

*Jim Lehman*

## NOTICE OF ANNUAL MEETING:

**Mark Nov. 10, 2012 in your date book. On that Saturday morning at 9:30 a.m. the Shenandoah Valley Mennonite Historians have their annual meeting at VMRC Village Hall. Come and hear our speaker.**

### **Editor's note:**

We are indebted to Sheldon "Pete" Burkholder for working through all the details of Rockingham County land and deed records, minute books, wills, and everything else he could put his hands on that throws light on this complex subject, then putting together what seems logical with regard to the ownership and involvement of Burkholder family members.

Obviously, it was a labor of love by someone who knows family genealogy and searching specialized records and how they contribute to putting some clarity and connections to the subject.

We welcome comments from anyone else who has worked through the details involving land, deed, survey books and other records, even including a search through Burnt Deed records. If someone has questions regarding any of the above details, contact Sheldon "Pete" Burkholder directly,

He can be reached by phone at 867-9287 or by email at [pburky@msn.com](mailto:pburky@msn.com)

*Shenandoah Mennonite Historian* Editor: James O. Lehman [lehmanj@myvmrc.net](mailto:lehmanj@myvmrc.net) Sketches: Jon Gehman

**Membership: SHENANDOAH VALLEY MENNONITE HISTORIANS, \$6.00/yr. individual; \$10/couple**

Membership Contact: James Rush 434-0792 [jameslrush@comcast.net](mailto:jameslrush@comcast.net)

Shenandoah Valley Mennonite Historians

780 Parkwood Drive

Harrisonburg, VA 22802