



# Shenandoah Mennonite Historian

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## **VERA'S JOURNEY, WHERE THE RIVER FLOWS, ANNUAL MEETING, NOV. 7**

In this issue we feature two significant books, and alert readers and members of Shenandoah Valley Mennonite Historians to our annual meeting on November 7, 2009.

*Vera's Journey*, which came off the press very recently, is simply a "must-read" for anyone interested in Virginia Mennonite history. You've never seen a book quite like this one—an amazing book, a one-of-a-kind. (No, the family is not requesting that I feature this book or make such statements! But it doesn't take long to see how important this is to Virginia Mennonite history and the Shenandoah Valley!)

The subtitle on the front cover says more: "*A True Story of God's faithfulness amid sudden deafness and a century of change.*" That it is, if you want to read about a whole century of Virginia Mennonite history as it was played out in the life of the woman, Vera Early Heatwole and her large family.

*Where the River Flows*, the other book for which we have a review has a subtitle that indicates its importance: *Finding Faith in Rockingham County, Virginia, 1726-1876*. Written by a non-Mennonite, it takes a broad look at what the subtitle says.

A little blurb on Internet from Heritage Center.com says more: "This book looks at the various denominations and their development west of the Blue Ridge mountains. Various denominations reviewed are Mennonites, Dunkers, Reformed Presbyterians, Baptist, Anglicans, Pietists, Separatists, Methodist, Jews, and Catholics."

It is wonderfully laid out, well illustrated, an example of artistic book publishing, a "coffee table" kind of book. It was published in 2003, but is well worth your while. The subtitle tells you it is not out of date. And it costs only \$19.95 now, rather than the \$50.00 it was priced at in the beginning!

Don't miss the annual meeting on Nov. 7. Besides a couple minutes of business you will certainly enjoy the dramatic, well-done film (DVD) that is based on John Heatwole's one-of-a-kind book *The Burning*, which came out some years ago, but which goes into the kind of detail only Heatwole knew.

Judy Yoder, *Vera's Journey: A true story of God's faithfulness amid sudden deafness and a century of change*. Harrisonburg, VA: Vision Publishers, 2009. 707 pp. \$24.95.

With the help of letters, diaries, interviews, historical resources and Vera's amazing memory covering a century, author Judy Yoder has recreated the life and times of Vera (Early) Heatwole in a long, fascinating story.

Life in the Shenandoah Valley through the twentieth century, including that of the Anabaptist churches, is portrayed with moving detail. Beginning with Vera's mother as a sensitive, young woman in 1899, the reader is captivated by scenes of ordinary, and unusual, events in the lives of the extended family, to Vera's death on August 9, 2008, after she had lived a very full and busy life of 102 years.

The commitment to faithfully follow one's understanding of God's will permeates the lives of the book's characters. It becomes heart wrenching for Vera, when as a fourteen-year-old she becomes painfully aware of what had been building within her since she first sensed a problem at age six—her parents' dilemma.

She observed the discrepancy between the Old Order Mennonite group where her "sweet, gentle Mama with her sense of right and wrong" was a member, and the Church of the Brethren of her "dear, quiet Papa who looked after them all." Each parent was loyal to their choice while respecting the other's, and the family attended both churches on alternating Sundays.

The significance between the two was highlighted when her father bought a Model T, which brought a reprimand from the Old Order bishop.

She had other problems to conquer, such as leaving home at six years old to live at her grandparents to go to school and carrying a secret shame at her difficulty in learning to read. That was quickly resolved in grade three when she had a good reading teacher who taught her an easy method of learning how to read.

Another difficulty was the anger building within her toward church leaders in early teen years. A bit later, at a young age, she experienced the ups and down of courtship with a young man from yet another church group, the Virginia Mennonite Conference. She struggled quite some time on the question of church loyalty.

However, her courtship with Ralph Heatwole eventually resolved her difficulty. She eventually chose the church in which Ralph grew up and to which he was loyal. They were married in late spring 1926 and had a happy marriage. Soon she became wrapped up in the joys and trials of raising a family and the hard work of being a farmer's wife with much work to occupy daily life. Older readers will enjoy nostalgic memories of drying corn, butchering days, and boiling apple butter.

Asked many years later what was the most difficult thing she had to deal with in her life, Vera identified her turmoil when as a young woman she sought to know what was right and wrong, where she belonged, and how she could choose a church home without being disloyal to one of her parents.

Most people would guess that her most difficult experience in life was to become suddenly deaf at age 38, caused by the mumps virus. She, her husband, the children and a dedicated teacher in Staunton helped her to learn lip reading. Her desire and determination to learn how to read lips at that age and her success in doing it is an amazing piece of the story.

She didn't want family members or anyone to mouth words in an exaggerated way. She wanted people to speak normally. With her good eyesight and bright mind she wanted to read their lips when they spoke normally. She also gave birth to two more children after she became deaf. Her family helped her overcome the difficulty of being a mother with newborn children.

After many years of marriage she shared her husband's growing responsibility when he was chosen by lot for church leadership. She lived happily with him through the Great Depression, World War II, and until his death in 1985.

Vera's constant desire to live in God's will and to guide her children in His way was richly rewarded in the choices they have made. As a widow of over twenty years she maintained an interest in people, travel, and events while anticipating her heavenly home.

This biography contains pictures, genealogical charts, a map, and a bibliography in its more than seven hundred pages. The stated prayer of the family "is that you, the reader, gain an insight into the past century and lives of real people with their struggles and victories, you will understand the need of God's grace in your life and be encouraged to live faithfully for God in your generation."

*Viola P. Stahl*

*Who read the book very quickly with great interest as soon as it was published.*

## How could such a book be written that covers a whole century of a woman who died at age 102?

That question in the editor's mind peaked his interest. It deals with the major groups that Mennonites related to in Virginia history—the Old Order Mennonite group of 1901 origin, Virginia Mennonite Conference, the local Church of the Brethren, the Southeastern Mennonite Conference development in 1972—all of these relating to one person!

Where could so much information be found of Vera's parents and grandparents and of their interest in local, state, and national events as they occurred in the 20<sup>th</sup> century? These questions in the editor's mind were answered in a major interview.<sup>1</sup>

How could such incredible detail be given, so much conversation by Vera, even the content of sermons preached? Enos E. Heatwole in the Foreword gives important clues.<sup>2</sup> "An attempt was made to accurately preserve the history and people in the story. However, most of the conversation and a few names were filled in by the author." A large majority of the people named were the actual people.

This included very careful research, double and triple-checking of wording by key people and good memories on the part of many of Vera's

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<sup>1</sup>Willard and Melba Kiser Heatwole and James and Ida Heatwole Goering, Bridgewater, VA, Oct.4, 2009. In this kind of interview, one usually stays away from quoting exact wording or ascribing certain comments to a given person. All four persons were generous and candid with their remarks. Quotation marks are used where needed. This article summarizes comments and impressions gained from the interview.

<sup>2</sup>The family committee included Enos and Willard Heatwole and Evelyn Heatwole Strite.

family members. Vera herself obviously had a sharp and keen mind until near death. Vera always wanted to know what was going on and she loved to travel. She took every opportunity to learn, even though she was deaf for 64 years from 1944 to 2008.

This noteworthy book of 54 chapters includes photographs, footnotes where needed, and unusual but candid gentleness in dealing with differences and church divisions that occurred.

By the time Vera began to sense that “Papa and Mama” had a dilemma she slowly began to perceive a bit of the differences and a bit of a rift. Eventually it became clear to her that Father Roy Early’s avid membership in the Church of the Brethren and Mother Ida’s loyalty to the Old Order Mennonites was a significant difference even if they never discussed it in the presence of the children.

At age 15 Vera heard a critical sermon about owning an automobile, which her father did. She became upset enough that she sought an answer to her conflicting thoughts. She went to a hill to think and pray. She came to a crisis point and poured out her heart to the Lord and gave her heart to Him. One of the children had deliberately asked Vera in her old age for details on what happened that day.

The book reads easily. It is well-written. The family was fortunate in getting Judy Yoder to put so much of her life into the Heatwole family, and into communicating with deaf Vera. I’m told that excellent copy editing of text and checking and double-checking of facts also greatly contributed to make it an easy-to-read book that comes across as accurately describing the life and times of Vera. It seems genuine in comparison with that century of Virginia Mennonite history.

The four-page Bibliography has more than a page of references to term papers, booklets,

articles and perhaps most significantly, to diaries, scrapbooks and files. Vera and husband Ralph Heatwole kept diaries or travelogues of short periods of time or of major travel events. Several family members kept diaries for short periods of years.

All the above do not adequately describe Vera’s remarkably sharp memory that spanned nearly a century. How could so much communication be done with a deaf person? She often talked with family members about events in her life. They, in turn, preserved good memories of things Vera told them.

Vera, with her excellent eyesight, became extremely proficient at reading lips, even occasionally doing so with a new person. Her husband took special pains to make sure Vera could see his lips when he spoke to her. The children all learned that too, as well as spelling out key words letter by letter with fingers.

The human memory is a remarkable thing and oftentimes, with a little special attention to recalling events, brings them back remarkably well, though colored with the developments over the years that change all of us. No doubt, everyone has selective memories and we all have our rose-colored glasses regarding the lives we have lived. A large family and many memories were involved in reconstructing events and developments in this biography.

Vera birthed twelve children, but to their grief, one died young. The other eleven grew to adulthood, married and had families. Vera is pictured as considering each of the 12 children a special gift from God. At her death on Aug. 9, 2008, she had 62 grandchildren, 229 great-grandchildren and 45 great-great grandchildren.

The book portrays her as pausing often to stop and pray, but Vera protested one time, after reading some manuscript pages. that she did not stop to pray as often as described in the book. Prayer to her, the family thinks, was when she

was on her knees interceding with the Lord about her family and various concerns.

In her old age much of the book was reviewed by Vera before it was finalized. That provided accuracy to the story. More than once she said, "No, I didn't say it that way." So the author changed it to what she understood Vera to describe from her memory. That memory even at age 100 helped make this account very unusual.

Occasionally, her sense of humor came out too. When a daughter brought home a new beau to get acquainted with her and Ralph, he was in for a real surprise when Vera asked him what made bees buzz. Answer: you would buzz too if someone took your honey and nectar!

If you miss this book, you don't learn about a wonderful, compassionate, interesting, well-traveled person who was well-adjusted to life!

Her photo on the outside of the front cover was taken when she was 95. Having a son-in-law operating a publishing business, Vision Publishers, helped make this an attractive well-done book! Christian Light Publications book store is a good place to buy it.

*Editor*

The family also has a major colorful genealogy of 242 pages, *Descendants of Enos E. & Clara K. Heatwole*, (Ralph's parents) done in 2008 by Bertha Heatwole Horst. Very limited copies are available at Christian Light Publications for \$32.

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Robert R. Hewitt III. *Where the River Flows: Finding Faith in Rockingham County, VA, 1726-1876*. Charlottesville: Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, 2003, Pp. 279. \$19.50.

This interesting and informative book details the history and development of religious groups and denominations in the Shenandoah Valley.

Utilizing the river as a theme, the author divides the contents into four sections titled Headwaters, Confluence, Rapids, and Cataracts. The river becomes an analogy for faith. He asserts that "where the river flows, everything will live." So faith will grow as long as adherents "chose to live where the river flows."

This project was funded by the Margaret Gratten Weaver Foundation of Harrisonburg. The author brings a sympathetic approach to this work, noting that "this project could not be accomplished in my own strength . . . but through the strength of the eternal God whom I serve.

The Valley was settled by persons of many religious traditions of which Mennonites and Brethren groups receive their fair share of the story. Hewitt says he tried to maintain a balance among the various groups. He develops briefly the beginning of the Anabaptist movement and its subsequent history. He uses the term "Mennonist".

A happy part of the story notes the cooperation and unity among Mennonites and Brethren around their opposition to slavery and their refusal to serve in the militia—reasons to view them as out of the mainstream of society. He notes the differences on the method of baptism.

He also carries the Joseph Funk story and his influence on Mennonites and other groups with his publication of *Genuine Church Music* in 1832, later titled *Harmonia Sacra*, which impacted the desire to change from German to English.

No history of religion in the valley would be complete without noting the impact of the Civil War, of which Hewitt devotes an entire chapter. He saw that event thus: "War did more than stain the soil of Rockingham, it brokered mortality into the hearts and minds of its citizens." Though enough ink was spilled over the squabble of method of baptism, he presents a forceful

reminder of their shared heritage in loyalty to Christ and commitment to respect life. The war account includes the Elder John Kline, the respected and revered Brethren leader who was martyred on his way home from Broadway.

Hewitt concludes his narrative with a reference to the stream of religious life here as both an "errant stream" and a "deeper river . . . whose water made this valley grow and flourish." He quotes Psalm 46: "There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God. . . ."

This large and handsome book is printed on glossy paper with numerous sketches, reproductions and photographs supporting the narrative and complementing the theme of the river. It makes an excellent gift for a bibliophile or a history buff.

*Jim Good.*

*Adapted from a review written for the Ridgeway Mennonite Church Newsletter*

### **Time to Renew Annual Membership Dues for Shenandoah Valley Mennonite Historians**

Single person: \$6.00

Couple: \$10.00

Send to James Rush

Shenandoah Valley Mennonite Historians

780 Parkwood Drive

Harrisonburg, VA 22802

[jameslrush@comcast.net](mailto:jameslrush@comcast.net) or call 540-434-0792

### **"THE BURNING" at Annual Meeting of SMH**

Be sure to mark your calendar for Saturday, November 7 at 9:00 a.m. for the annual meeting of Shenandoah Valley Mennonite Historians and

**It will be held at VMRC Village Hall.** After a brief business meeting we will be showing the very dramatic "The Burning," a DVD motion picture that is based on John Heatwole's very detailed book "The Burning."

Now this film can be seen in this area for the first time. It is dramatic and remarkable, a must-see film on the tremendous destruction by Gen. Sheridan during the Civil War in the fall of 1864 when his troops came through and burned hundreds of barns, mills and some houses.

There's a large cast of narrators, actors and musicians and many new sketches of the horrors of that event that was so hard on local Shenandoah Valley residents. Yes, the Mennonites come in for mention. At several points Mennonite families (although not named as Mennonites (Peter Hartman and Reuben Swope for example) are mentioned regarding the devastation they were made to suffer.

Civil War scholar Stephen Start claims "The deliberate, planned devastation of the Shenandoah Valley ranks as one of the grimmest episodes of this very grim war."

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