

Shenandoah Mennonite Historian



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IN THIS ISSUE

What Does the Michael Shank Diary of 1898-2005 Reveal to Us?

After he was married for some years to his third wife, Sarah Miller, who was a German Baptist Brethren woman, did he slowly but surely leave the Mennonites, give up his deacon work and tip over into German Baptist Brethren membership? Or did he try to keep his feet in both worlds?

Did he die a Brethren or a Mennonite? That question has been unclear to descendants. In this issue we have definitive answers to the questions. His diary would lead one to believe that both denominations were quite similar in church life style—such as communion twice a year, footwashing at communion time, annual harvest meetings and churches not having weekly Sunday worship in the same meetinghouse. The diary reveals a few differences. Brethren had what they called “quarterly meetings” and “visit” meetings; Mennonites had a “conference meeting” periodically.

Leaders were chosen differently. Mennonites would nominate several or a number of men, then use the lot, thinking that meant God was making the choice. Brethren had the congregation or the group present at a meeting where new leadership was chosen, do so by election. Apparently, to them, God would direct the choice of new leadership by the voice of the people.

One is impressed how easily people from both groups socialized and visited back and forth. Both groups tended to be concerned with helping someone in need, even if that person was not a member of the same church. Being good neighbors was high on everyone’s agenda.

THE MICHAEL SHANK DIARY

1898-1905

We explored the question of his church affiliation by combing his diary and carefully scanning L. J. Heatwole's "Church Record Book."

It didn't help to ask a few descendants. One said he was Mennonite and another said he was Brethren! His third wife, Sarah Miller, was Brethren and that's when the diary was written.

His diary does give hints on the question of whether he stayed Mennonite or joined the German Baptist Brethren (then commonly called "Dunkard," but now officially known as Church of the Brethren). Shank, surprisingly, never answers that question candidly, so one could finally assume whichever way one chose. Here's one hint, however.

The well-known Middle District bishop, L. J. Heatwole came to visit Shank on September 25, 1901, and he told his diary that day, "L. J. Heatwole was here to find out of me, whether I joined the Dunkard Church, and also to get the correct date."

Is that a strong hint or does one need to look further? There were numerous Brethren churches within range of where Michael and Sarah (Miller) Shank lived at Mole Hill and eventually they often attended a Brethren "meeting" on Sunday. Does that give us two strong hints? But if he joined the Brethren he never tells us in his diary.

What answer did the Mennonite bishop get? Or does one look for further hints? We'll give more clues from his well-written diary, as well as give a bit of a snapshot of life in the years 1899-1905, plus we'll see what L. J. Heatwole has to report in his extensive writing in his "Church Record Book."

You may wish to refer to the *Shenandoah Mennonite Historian* issue of three years ago, Spring 2004, for major background on Michael

Shank, his previous two marriages and his marrying a Brethren woman. That issue also covers 1898. This *SMH* issue picks up primarily on his diary from 1899-1905.

First, a Bit of Review

Michael Shank (July 15, 1829-June 26, 1905), son of Jacob and Frances (Miller) Shank, was ordained a Mennonite deacon for the Middle District (now Central and Harrisonburg districts) on August 18, 1870. At that point Michael was 41 and had been married almost 19 years to Lydia Beery. They had nine children, some of whom remained Mennonite.

The happy family prospered until a triple tragedy struck in 1884 when three family members inhaled poisonous gas from a coal stove. Between March 12 and 27, death struck three times. First to go was Mother Lydia. Soon thereafter, twenty-year old Abbie and then eleven-year-old Mattie died also. Three times in two weeks, Michael Shank grieved at the graves of loved ones. Later he wrote a twenty-stanza poem about his tragic loss and resignation to the will of the Lord (see page 6 of the Spring 2004 issue for most of the poem).

A year later, February 17, 1885, Michael remarried, this time to the widow, Margaret Rhodes, daughter of the Abraham Heatwoles. Michael was 55 and Margaret was 50. However, only seven years later she died on July 7, 1892. This time the lonely man found companionship with the Brethren single woman, Sarah Miller, daughter of Henry M. and Mary (Detrick) Miller.

The diary, which begins 1898, shows them often alternating attendance at Mennonite and Brethren services. Page 3 explores the data on their church attendance record from 1898-1905. He continued to function for some time as a Mennonite deacon. When he stopped that around age 72, was it because deacons often retired from "deaconing" in their 70s, or was it because of other reasons? He was almost 76 years of age when he died on June 26, 1905.

WHERE AND HOW OFTEN DID THEY ATTEND A MENNONITE CHURCH OR A BRETHERN CHURCH?

See the table below. Rather frequently Michael did not attend a “meeting” (he uses the term interchangeably for either Mennonite or Brethren) due to bad weather, poor health, and a few times he admits to staying home because their plants needed someone to watch them. They ran a produce farm and peddled the berries and all kinds of produce in Harrisonburg.

We should note that both Michael and Sarah were dedicated Christians and very interested in helping anyone in need. In that role Sarah virtually did the work of a deaconess because she spent so much time in helping neighbors and Brethren and Mennonites, if anyone had a need of any kind. We will also observe, as does the diary, that frequently they attended services of one kind or another during the week.¹

Sunday Church Attendance by Michael Shank, 1898-1905¹
Number of times he attended in that year

1898	1899	1900	1901	1902	1903	1904		
							Mennonite Churches	
							Total 1898-1904	
9	8	6	3	1	2	1	30	Bank (Middle District)
1	2	1					4	Pike (Middle District)
9	10	3	5	4	5	3	39	Weavers (Middle District)
1	1						2	Mt. Clinton (Middle District)
1							1	Hildebrand (Southern District)
1							1	Springdale (Southern District)

							German Baptist Brethren Churches	
							Total 1898-1904	
1	3	3	2	4	1	2	16	Beaver Creek
5	4	3	2	5	2	2	23	Bridgewater
5	4	2	4	4	3	3	25	Dayton
1	1	1	1	4	3	1	12	Fairview
	1		1				2	Franklin
2		4	2	1	2	2	13	Garbers
4	2	2	5	2	1	2	18	Greenmount
			4	6	10	4	24	Hinton Grove
			1				1	Linville Creek
					1		1	Pleasant Run
	3						3	Trinity

¹With assistance from Clarence M. Moyer, 1292 Shank Drive, Harrisonburg, VA, on March 26, 2007, and Roger Sappington, *The Brethren in Virginia* (Harrisonburg: Committee for Brethren History in Virginia, 1973) in identifying the German Baptist Brethren congregations of that time. Twice the Shank diary speaks of attending at “Snaps Creek,” but neither Clarence Moyer, nor Roger Sappington ever heard of a Brethren Church by that name. Modern maps indicate a small tributary named Snapps Creek joining Muddy Creek near the location of the Fairview Brethren Church, so it must have been a long lost nickname for the Fairview Church, because he names Brethren ministers preaching when they attended “Snaps Creek.” Hence, add two more times above when they attended a Brethren church.

NOW THE DIARY

Deacon Michael married Sarah Miller on July 30, 1893, a year after his second wife died. His diary in the Virginia Mennonite Conference Archives begins January 1, 1898. We don't know if he kept one earlier. Shank seldom makes a personal comment, but on the last day of 1902 he notes the date they married and he adds, "up to this time we have lived together in uninterrupted peace and happiness; one of our Chief delights has been to attend public Worship." He notes further that attending worship had to be a one-day event. We recall this was horse and buggy days when it took much longer to get somewhere.

He further reveals their financial arrangement, "Financially our Interests have been separate, what was the property of one was not the property of the other, yet her economy, and industry, and concern for my prosperity and welfare were unceasing and untiring, in this she has been above the average Wife . . ." (we quote misspellings and capital letters at the beginning of words as they appear in the diary.)

Obviously, in this rare personal glimpse he is quite satisfied with life and much pleased with

Sarah. From his perspective it seems to have been a good marriage, with no evidence of marital tensions in the diary. Of course, we don't have her perspective. We must remember, however, that Sarah was 26 years younger than Michael, young enough to be his daughter! By 1902, Michael was 73 and Sarah was 47.

It was her first and only marriage and evidence abounds that she was, indeed, quite a worker and a wife that saw to his every need and worked hard to see that both prospered. Husband and wife roles were quite traditional. As far as he was concerned she "was above the average wife." If only she would have kept a candid diary!

In the early years of the diary, it is evident both worked extremely hard with phenomenal quantities of various kinds of produce which they peddled to Harrisonburg. One time, after a late February snow, both headed for town with a load of eggs, onions and other items on their sleigh, and because branches blocked the road, they drove into the woods. In returning to the road down over a steep bank they upset, spilling everything. The jumpy horse "Coally" took off with the sleigh and had to be caught by a neighbor. This sketch illustrates the spill and the horse and sleigh gone.



Also, by 1901-02, they attended Brethren churches much more often than Mennonite services. But he seemed happy relating to many Brethren. Likewise, when they attended a Mennonite service she went with him, both earlier and later. They obviously had friends in both groups and mingled freely with people. Seemingly, denominational lines mattered little.

The table of attendance at "meetings" for 1898 and 99 indicated they attended Sunday services a few times oftener at Mennonite services in a year's time. But in 1900 that patterned reversed itself and they attended a Mennonite service 10 times and a Brethren service 14 times. In 1901, Mennonite churches (only Bank and Weavers) saw them eight times, but a whole array of nine Brethren churches saw them a total of 20 times. That change was dramatic!

In 1902, Brethren churches saw them 26 times and Bank and Weavers saw them only five times. Had he become enamored with the Brethren or even become a member, or had she gently suggested on much greater emphasis on Brethren activities? The answer eventually emerges.

On August 4, 1898, with emphasis on Mennonite meetings that year, he went to "harvest meeting" at Weavers and was hurt because so few younger members attended. Ironically, he says "The Saviour says, 'He tht gathereth not with me, scatereth abroad.'" When members stay away "on account of carelessness, they are scattering." Within three years he and Sarah were missing most Mennonite meetings and going much more often to Brethren meetings! Did he forget his own advice?

In December of 1898, Michael rejoiced at the "wonderful sermon" that John S. Coffman preached at the Bank church. Before 1900 he appears to be quite involved as a deacon, as illustrated in February 1899, when he wrote about the decision to ordain several deacons. In March he was one of a committee of seven to elect "our Sunday school superintendents." Elected at that

point were his good friends, Eli Brunk, a fellow deacon, and S. M. Burkholder, son of the well-known bishop Martin Burkholder. A few weeks later he was on another committee at the Bank church, again to elect Sunday school superintendents.

On April 9, 1899, he was involved in nominations for deacons and the following Sunday at a "solemn" meeting at Bank, S. M. Burkholder and Henry Blosser were the new deacons chosen and ordained.

In May 1900, he rejoiced at listening to A. D. Wenger talk about Palestine and the fact that 31 persons were baptized at Weavers Church. The following month, when two other deacons came to visit and Ben Wenger came at the same time, Shank "commenced" talking with Wenger and reproving him "for quenching the good Spirit that was at work in Some of his Children" and Wenger using his influence against his own children desiring to join the church. As a good deacon, Shank thought he needed to reprove a church member.

On September 4, 1900, he refers to that all-important day when things were brought to a head regarding the Middle District "troubles" that eventually resulted in the formation of the Old Order Mennonite group. Says Shank, this was the largest meeting he ever saw in "our church" (Bank), with preachers from all three Virginia districts present. "It was intended to bring about a reconciliation," and those who refused to identify with the main body of the church, would "finally be disowned." It sounds a bit like reconciliation was supposed to happen on the terms set by L. J. Heatwole and the main body. Many did not go into the Council room, of those who went in, 241 were with the Church, and 6 wanted a little time to consider and 4 refused to identify with the Church." His numbers agree with Harry A. Brunk, the Virginia historian.²

²L. J. Heatwole called that day the "great and eventful" day. See Harry A. Brunk, *History of Mennonites in Virginia*, Vol. 1 (Harrisonburg: Pub. by author, 1959), 515-17 for more detail, at least as Brunk put it together.

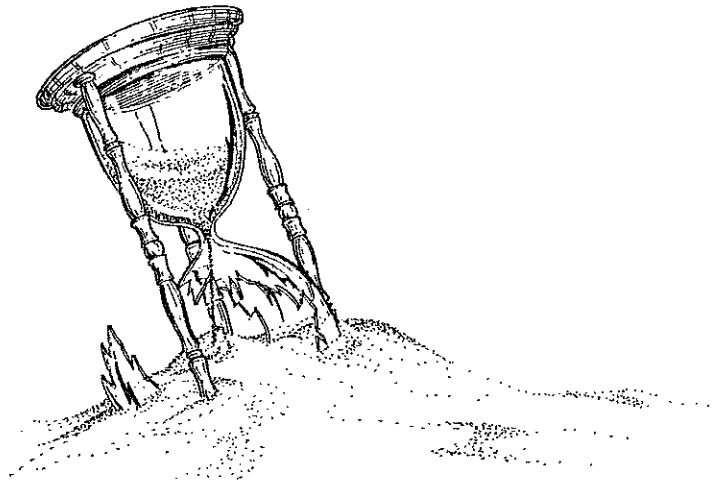
Since that is all Michael Shank says about that day, we learn more from bishop Lewis J. Heatwole, who gives more detail in his "Church Record Book," a handwritten book located in the Virginia Mennonite Conference Archives at EMU. L. J. Heatwole was quite a record keeper, and wrote in chronological detail about the discussions and arguments that had gone on for a number of years, as a dissenting group disagreed with the direction the main body of Mennonites was going, and apparently disagreed with L. J. Heatwole's handling of matters.

There were 25 ministers and deacons present to witness this September 4 meeting, which became contentious, especially when bishop Heatwole refused to allow a few of the dissenting group to speak. There had been numerous private and public discussions about the issues revolving around the questions whether to have Sunday schools, revival meetings and greater activity in church life. Reconciliation did not happen in this September meeting, despite preacher Daniel S. Brunk from Ohio preaching on love and loyalty to the church. The differences of opinion had become too hardened from both sides for reconciliation to happen; it seems.

Shank's diary further noted that on Christmas day, by authority of Gabriel D. Heatwole, a minister and member of the dissenting group, announced a meeting for the Bank Church, after church had been dismissed and L. J. Heatwole had announced that the church would officially have Christmas services at Mt. Clinton and Pike churches. Hereafter, the dissenting group began holding worship services in various churches. Unfortunately, too often they found themselves locked out from Mennonite churches.³ Thus the Old Order Mennonite Church began to be formed by the dissenting group.

³Further details do not need to be elaborated upon here. It is all too sad and regrettable that a compromise could not be reached. Rather negative local newspaper reporting about the disagreements among the Mennonites did not help.

The final straw came on March 31, 1901. L. J. Heatwole's insistence that the dissenters declare themselves a part of the main church failed, so 69 members were disowned. Shank's diary says nothing more. He had heard and seen too much. He didn't even bother going to the March 31 meeting. He simply says "We did not go to meeting. They stayed home to "take Care of the plants." Reading between the lines it was obvious Shank was greatly distressed with what was happening in his beloved Mennonite Church.



TURN OF THE CENTURY AND A TURN AWAY FROM A FIFTY- YEAR HERITAGE

First we note Shank's comments on January 1, 1901, which he considered to be the first day of the twentieth century.

The Old year, as well as the nineteenth Century are now things of the past, and this is the first day of the first year, of the Twentieth Century, which has been almost unconsciously ushered in upon us by the flight of time. This is a record, such as I never made before, nor will I ever be able to make such a one hereafter.

On the first Sunday of the new year, January 6, 1901, Michael is very pleased that they could attend the dedication of the new Hinton Grove

Church (a small Brethren church they attended fairly often thereafter; the church closed in 1941 and is unknown to many today.)

As already observed, the Shanks failed to go to that March 31, 1901 meeting, when 69 members were ousted. But their activities of the week following March 31 are revealing. On Monday April 1, the Brethren ministers Jacob Miller and Abraham Miller visited the Shanks and were served the noon meal (the major meal of the day was usually at noon). On Thursday, April 4, Ben Bowman came calling to solicit them for a Brethren church project and was also served the noon meal. On Friday the Shanks went to Beaver Creek and had what he described as a "Soul Stirring meeting." On Saturday April 6 they went to Garbers Church for "visit meeting" and had "a good time." A few days later when Weavers Church had a Council meeting in preparation for the spring communion time, Shanks stayed home due to very bad weather.⁴ Are all these events coincidental?

Of course, Michael did not forget the Mennonites. He noted on April 30 that preacher Samuel Shank died and on June 16, 1901, Michael was deeply saddened at the death of bishop Abraham Shank. That left only two preachers in the "lower" district (now Northern). They attended the bishop's funeral at the Zion Mennonite Church. Nonetheless, enthusiasm for Brethren meetings now seemed to considerably outstrip interest in Mennonite meetings.

Michael and Sarah attended many more Brethren meetings that year (22 to 8), and it was quite a variety they attended. The Brethren, like the Mennonites, did not have church every Sunday in the same meetinghouses, so they needed to circulate around to catch a Brethren meeting. Furthermore, they went to "harvest meetings," quarterly Council meetings and other Brethren meetings. Several times in the fall of 1901 Michael speaks of hearing "elegant" sermons from Brethren preachers, a word he never used to describe a Mennonite sermon.

⁴One should not read too much into this comment on bad weather. The Shanks often stayed home when they considered the weather to be too bad to go anywhere.

It was that year, September 25, when Middle District bishop, L. J. Heatwole came for a visit and Michael recorded in his diary, "L. J. Heatwole was here to find out of me, whether I joined the Dunkard Church, and also to get the correct date." Regrettably, Shank only reports the questions but not the answers. Should that be taken that he had joined the Brethren Church?"

Indeed so! The L. J. Heatwole "Church Register" of members simply says that Michael Shank was "Baptized into Dunkard church July 21, 1901." What did Michael say in his diary? Only that they went to Garbers Church that Sunday morning, and after hearing "Bro Conner" preach they went to John A. Millers for dinner after the meeting. That's all he says! But there's a good bit more to be said, as told us by L. J. Heatwole in his handwritten church record book.

"At the time of the regular 4th Sunday meeting at Weavers Church on July 28, 1901 it was rumored among certain of the brotherhood that Deacon Michael Shank had been baptized by the Dunkards on the Sunday previous. I made further inquiry of Sister Mary V. Custer who works for Shank's family, when she replied that it was correct, that the baptism had taken place near Bridgewater at Elder John Miller's, Sunday July 21st.

Bishop Heatwole continued, "It seems remarkably strange that a man after being in the church for 50 years and rendering service as a deacon for 31 years should thus forsake the faith and fellowship of the church of his forefathers. He was visited later by me and upon inquiry as to the truth of the matter he said the rumor we had heard was correct and the step had not been hastily taken but was on his mind for the past 5 years."

Michael earlier had been quite involved in trying to help settle the differences. L. J. Heatwole tells us that on "Tuesday, January 26, 1897, all the deacons of the Middle District, except David E. Rhodes, were in counsel at the home of Michael Shank." First they planned for a general visit to members, then they concluded that because they would run into dissatisfactions, that it would be better to have a general public meeting to see if reconciliation could be reached. They set that day for Feb. 4, 1897. [Note that this was before Shank began his diary.]

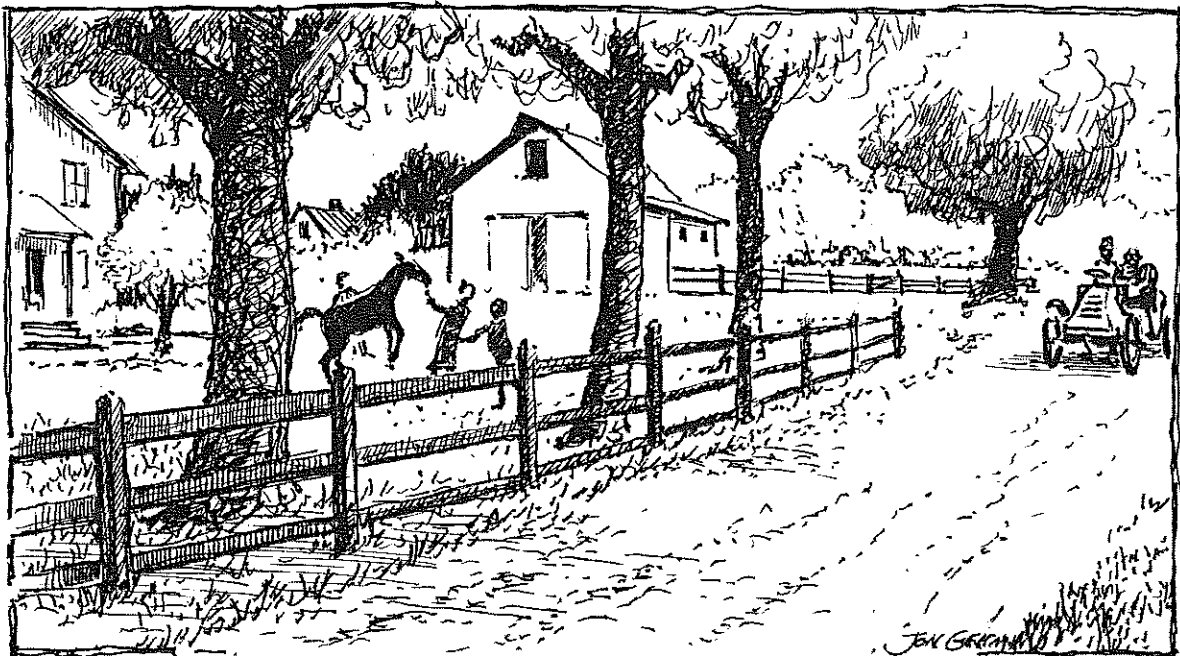
Heatwole described that February meeting between district ministers and deacons and "near about all" the dissatisfied members who came up with three spokesmen. One requested that the church be brought to the way it was 20 years ago, another asked for "unconditional surrender of all methods of church work" he did not approve of, and that leaders repent "for leading the church astray." A third wanted district leaders to show from Scripture "if their position was wrong." Heatwole goes on to say that he and Deacon

Michael Shank "replied" to the above demands.⁵ Thus we know Shank had tried to help settle the significant differences, four years before he joined the Brethren.

Back to 1901, the crucial year. Shank by now was also subscribing to *The Messenger*, the Brethren magazine. When the West Rockingham Fire Insurance Company met at Dayton on Saturday May 31, 1902, Michael could not attend because Garbers Church had a communion service.

Though settled in now with the Brethren, Michael had not forgotten the Mennonites. In June 1902, he attended at Bank twice. On January 1, 1903, he delighted in attending the "old folks" Harmonia Sacra singing. On April 26 they were back at Weavers where "four or more" of his grandchildren were baptized.

One time in 1902 they had an eventful time when an automobile appeared in the distance. Because they were dealing with "Coally" the jumpy horse, everyone turned out to help control the horse, as illustrated below!



⁵Heatwole reported further on how badly the meeting went. He claims they wrangled nearly four hours.

Many more illustrations could be cited concerning church attendance, as the Shanks largely attended Brethren meetings, but occasionally went to a good one in a Mennonite church (usually Bank or Weavers), particularly if there was an out-of-town preacher. For Sunday morning worship, preaching was always the important thing to Michael. He never commented about the music or other parts of the service, except for baptisms. One time he noted going to Hinton Grove (Brethren) "to help get ready for communion" and he remarked that they observed footwashing in relation to the communion service

Obviously, Michael had adopted the Brethren. In September 1904 he observed one time how he loves to associate with the Brethren "who we dearly love." Another time, Friday August 26, 1904, after a meeting at Bridgewater, he noted "our dear Elder Emanuel Long" was there. He frequently remarked about enjoyable meetings and excellent sermons he heard at Brethren churches, one example being the time he listened to both Benjamin Miller and Hiram Miller at Greenmount.

Obviously, Michael and Sarah related easily to Brethren, Mennonites and Old Order Mennonites after that group developed. One Sunday they attended "meeting" at the Pleasant View Old Order Mennonite Church. Their new building was finished and dedicated in 1903. More than once Israel Rohrer visited Shank. Rohrer was also in

the lot when John Dan Wenger was chosen as a minister for the Old Order group.

Many times Michael and Sarah attended funerals, no matter which denomination. When Gabriel D. Heatwole's wife died in May 1904, the community crowd at the Pleasant View Old Order Mennonite Church was so huge that L. J. Heatwole, Emanuel Long, Jacob Glick and others sat on "the Preachers bench" to make more room in the building.

As the sunset of life approached, Michael did less and less work and relied much more on Sarah and others to do the work, as neighbors, friends or relatives came and took care of work. In his last years, the peddling of food produce diminished until it stopped.

He went through extended periods of illness. In December 1902 he was so sick that his diary suffered, except that he wrote who visited, which was mostly Mennonites. He especially appreciated L. J. Heatwole's visit. When he became too ill to write, Sarah picked up the diary. Invariably, she wrote about Michael as "Pap." Later, granddaughter "Minnie" kept the diary through his last illness and death. After he died Sarah wrote about visiting her brother in Arkansas. It was her first time to travel out-of-state.

Thus we come to the end of Michael Shank's life, a rich life that had looked through the lens of both Mennonite and Brethren perspectives.

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James O. Lehman

Remember that famous Emma Lyon Bryan nineteenth century painting of Harrisonburg, that has been in the news lately?

There's an interesting Mennonite connection to her son, Allan Cuthbert Bryan. He was a long-time Harrisonburg resident and worked as a postal clerk, in a railway express office and as a carpenter. Although raised by a father and mother who attended the Presbyterian and Episcopalian churches, Bryan "found his salvation" in May 1942, at the "Mennonite Mission" in Harrisonburg. That would have been Chicago Avenue Mennonite Church (now Harrisonburg Mennonite), which he joined. He died at the Old People's Home, Rittman, Ohio, on November 23, 1943, where his funeral was preached by William G. Detweiler, founder of the "Calvary Hour."

Gospel Herald, Vol. 36, Jan. 13, 1944, and "Emma's Painting Finds a Home at HRHS." *The Harrisonburg-Rockingham Historical Society Newsletter*. Vol. 29, Winter 2007, p. 7.

Current news item

MABEL MEMORIAL CHAPEL AND MENNONITES

Did you see the news story in the *Daily News Record* on March 26, 2007, that the Presbyterian Mabel Memorial Chapel held its last service on Easter Sunday, April 8, after which it will "Slip Into History?" If more of its early history would have been told, we would discover that Mennonites were involved for some years in its early days, according to Harry A. Brunk, who mentions it in both volumes of his *History of Mennonites in Virginia* (Vol. 1, p. 320; Vol. 2, pp. 93, 136). The Chapel received its name from Lucian Heneberger, a Navy doctor who promised to fund much of the original building if it would be named after his wife, Mabel.

At least two Mennonite families, Ike Goods and Moses Wengers, lived in the community two miles southeast of Harrisonburg. According to Brunk, Moses Wengers gave the land for a chapel, school, and cemetery for the Presbyterian Church that the Harrisonburg Presbyterian Church was interested in establishing. The deed was made November 3, 1898, and the chapel built in the spring of 1899 and dedicated on August 6. In exchange for the gift, Mennonites of the Middle District (now Central and Harrisonburg districts) were to be allowed to hold services once a month for the few Mennonite families of the area.

Mennonite services were held the third Sunday of the month for more than two decades. Sunday school was held for a while with Frank Swartz of Dale Enterprise as superintendent. In 1912, when the chapel was being enlarged, Mennonites were asked to help. A. B. Burkholder was asked to solicit money. In 1917 A. B. Burkholder and the young minister (later bishop) S. H. Rhodes gave Bible teaching, along with evangelistic preaching, hoping that persons attending would accept the faith and doctrines of the Mennonites. This may have been the high point, for there were twelve applicants for baptism.

Membership did not grow so Mennonites discontinued services in the 1920s. However, as late as 1929 the Middle District received a plea from the people of the community for services. Now the Mabel Memorial Chapel closed, and with it a tiny bit of Mennonite history fades into oblivion!

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SKETCHES IN THIS ISSUE ARE BY JON GEHMAN, who works from the Red Barn Studio. Telephone: 833-2390	IS YOUR MEMBERSHIP IN? \$6.00 per individual/\$10 a couple Send to Jim Rush, 780 Parkwood Drive, Harrisonburg, VA 22802
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