



# Shenandoah Mennonite Historian

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## 1898: BRETHREN AND MENNONITE RELATION- SHIPS AS ILLUSTRATED BY MENNONITE DEACON, MICHAEL SHANK AND HIS WIFE, SARAH MILLER SHANK, A BRETHREN WOMAN

Years ago it was not unusual for intermarriage to occur between Mennonite and Brethren young people. Then a decision needed to be made—to which church would they relate?

What is unusual, though, is to find a Mennonite deacon married to a Brethren woman, while he continued to serve as a deacon. Which church would they attend? Did she have to become a Mennonite so he could continue as deacon? Did he respect her upbringing and frequently attend a Brethren church, so that it was a mutual exchange of worship preferences and getting acquainted with friends from both groups?

The Virginia Mennonite Archives has the original copies of a diary kept by Shank from 1898 to 1905, when he died. Regrettably, the good deacon did not keep a diary for many years previously, which would give us a larger window into the Mennonite world of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Michael Shank (July 15, 1829 – June 26, 1905) was ordained a Mennonite deacon for the Middle District (now Central District) on August 18, 1870, after Virginia Conference in April of that year gave approval for a new deacon to be chosen and ordained. Frederick A. Rhodes, the veteran deacon of that district made the request of Conference.

Shank was already 41 years old and he had been married for almost 19 years to Lydia Beery, when he became deacon. Exactly a month before his ordination, Lydia had delivered their eighth child, Jacob Luther Shank. Some two and a half years later they had their last child, Matty Elizabeth.

Upon his ordination, the two oldest daughters, Frances and Hetty were 18 and 17 and the oldest son was nearly 15. They were good help on the farm just west of the Pike Mennonite Church. Later Michael moved his family to Mole Hill, at which location they had a greenhouse and they began to raise vegetables and fruit to take to town to various customers.<sup>1</sup>

The happy family prospered. Within five years of Shank's ordination at least three of the older children had married. Nearly all stayed with the Mennonite Church, although interestingly enough, several were married by Rev. John Flory, believed to be a Brethren minister. Weddings in those days occurred in the home and it was not uncommon to ask a minister neighbor or friend to marry a couple, rather than insist on a Mennonite minister. Many Mennonites were community-minded and relationships were generally good with their Brethren neighbors. Both groups believed much the same and dressed much the same. One major difference was the mode of baptism, but that did not much affect daily neighborly relationships.

Alas, tragedy struck the Shank home near the Pike Church, in 1884, when three family members inhaled poisonous gas from a coal stove. Between March 13 and 27, the fatal "death's dart" struck three times. Mother Lydia succumbed first. Soon thereafter the grieving deacon and his family lost twenty-year-old Abbie and eleven-year-old Mattie too. Three times within two weeks they stood at the graves of their loved ones and wept. Father Shank could write poetry and perhaps his family helped write the twenty-stanza poem about their loss and their resignation to cling to the Lord, despite their sorrow. (See page 6 for most of the poem).<sup>2</sup>

A bit less than a year later, on February 17, 1885, the lonely Michael Shank remarried, this time to the widow, Margaret Rhodes, who was a daughter of the Abraham Heatwoles. Michael was 55 and Margaret was 50.<sup>3</sup>

However, the good deacon lost his second wife after only seven years. Margaret died on July 7, 1892. The lonely man found companionship this time with the Brethren single woman, Sarah Miller, daughter of Henry M. Miller and Mary Detrick, whom he married on July 30, 1893. By this time Shank was 64 and Sarah was only 38, young enough to be his daughter! In fact, three of Michael's children were older than Sarah.

It was not unusual for an older man to marry a much younger woman. But for a Mennonite deacon to marry someone that was 26 years younger, and not even a Mennonite at that—this was a bit unusual! It is not hard to imagine that a few tongues might have wagged.

But it was a good marriage. Grace Campbell, who is 95 and still living, says that Grandmother Sarah "was a wonderful grandmother." Like her grandfather the deacon, Sarah was often helpful to others and in visiting the sick.

## Now the Diary of 1898

Four-and-a-half years after marrying Sarah, Deacon Shank began to keep a diary in which he wrote something every day very faithfully. He began on January 1, 1898, with the following words.

The old year with its joys and its sorrows, its prosperities and its adversities, its pleasures and its reverses, is gone into the past, and many friends and loved ones have also passed away; but God has graciously extended our lives and permitted us to enter upon a new year. What He has in store for us, is altogether unknown to us now, but having full confidence in Him, we trust that all things will work together for good to them that love Him.

We now enter the new year full of hope and cheer, that by the grace of God we may live more to His glory in the coming year than we have in the past.

The Shanks now lived at Mole Hill with their greenhouse. John Wenger worked for them some in taking care of the plants in the greenhouse. On that New Year's day he worked at fixing the "hot bed sash."

The diary is written in good handwriting with ink (see page 5) and it is obvious that Michael and Sarah went to both Mennonite and Brethren churches, sometimes alternating, sometimes several Sundays in a row at one or the other of the denominations. If the weather was too bad they stayed home (remember this was horse and buggy days, a different era than we are used to). Usually, they went to church on Sunday. There is no distinct pattern with relation to Brethren or Mennonite attendance

So, for example, February 1898. On the 6<sup>th</sup> they went to Bank Mennonite to a funeral, on the next two Sundays it was the Fairview and Garber's Brethren churches, then on the 27<sup>th</sup> to Weavers Mennonite. The following Sunday, March 6 they went to Greenmount Brethren for of their new building. A number of a number of "strange preachers" were there, says Shank. ("Strange" in those days meant visiting preachers.) That event drew such a huge crowd that many could not get inside.

On the 13<sup>th</sup> of March it was the Dayton Brethren, the following week to the Bank church, and to Bridgewater Brethren on the 27<sup>th</sup>. Interestingly enough, on April 3 they stayed home because he "had to watch the plants very closely" after a hard frost. A few days later he observed that they had 700 or 800 strawberry plants in the cellar, likely placed there to prevent frostbite.

Sally Shank came to work for them for the summer. From their own big strawberry patch that spring the women picked many gallons of berries and Michael's job was to take them to town to sell them. By September Sally was taken home again and Sarah was going to try to "do without a girl."

At the spring communion time Michael went to "Council Meeting" at Weavers Church. This important meeting was always held in advance of communion time and every person present was personally expected to indicate whether he or she were at peace with God or not, and thus be ready for communion.

At spring conference time, Shank attended the Virginia Mennonite Conference at Brennemens Church (the forerunner of Lindale Church). However, Sarah got off at Greenmount to be with her mother. For overnight lodging, Michael joined her there. Conference minutes indicate Michael being listed with the deacons. On May 22 and June 5 they went to communion meetings at Weavers and Mt. Clinton where Shank may have helped with communion, or at least was available to assist, as deacons usually did.

An interesting horse and buggy event occurred on June 19 when they went to the Bank church. Right after the meeting a "heavy thundergust" occurred suddenly. They and others hustled to put up protective curtains. They sat in the buggy, turned its back to the wind and, having pulled up the "stormcloth," they waited out the storm.

Brethren churches they attended that summer included Greenmount, Dayton, Beaver Creek and Garber's. Once, when attending Greenmount,

Michael and Sarah went early, listened to them sing and the deacon enthusiastically made new friends, and "had a general good time" at the "soul inspiring meeting." August was the time to go to special "harvest meetings." At Weavers the good deacon said he "was considerably hurt because the young members did not attend the meeting better." If members "stay away on account of carelessness, they are scattering." They also attended a harvest meeting at Trinity, where Joe Keagy preached. Several times that year they attended a Brethren church at which Joe Keagy preached.

Twice Shank accompanied either another deacon or Bishop L. J. Heatwole to pay personal visits to individuals to whom they needed to talk to regarding "church concerns." He never tells us how he and Sarah dealt with financial matters, but one time when they visited Eli Brunk, the other Mennonite Middle District deacon, Sarah loaned him \$100!

At fall communion time Shank attended both at Bank and Pike Mennonite "Council meetings." They also attended the Greenmount communion service on Saturday afternoon October 1.

Then, almost immediately, it was time to attend the fall session of Virginia Mennonite Conference at the Hildebrand Mennonite church in Augusta County. Michael and Sarah both went by horse and buggy for that lengthy trip. They left at 4:00 a.m. Each time it took all day to travel. Both times they stopped near a bridge at Mt. Meridian, at a Myers place to feed and rest the horse and themselves. Though they obviously attended the conference, the minutes fail to record deacon Michael Shank's presence at that conference. It is likely that was an oversight by the secretary. On the way home from conference they stopped in for a visit with the old and feeble Bishop Jacob Hildebrand and there "had a devotional exercise."

At fall communion time Shank got involved in obtaining the wine and the bread for

communion. He went to old deacon Frederick Rhodes to see whether he would get the wine, "but he would not." Then he checked in with Eli Brunk and next went to Daniel Brunk, but he was sold out, then Shank went to town for some. But, since they wanted 40 cents a pint in town, he thought that was too expensive! This was on Friday and he needed it by Sunday. But he left town without it and he got Eli Brunk to furnish the wine for the October 16 communion service at the Bank church. On the 29<sup>th</sup> they attended the Brethren communion service at Bridgewater. A day later they attended another service to hear P. S. Miller preach "a wonderful sermon" to a very large crowd.

In November they went to the Dayton church, then three times to the Bridgewater church to hear I. B. Trout, "and he did a great sermon," thought Shank. He also attended an unusual Mennonite "Conference meeting at Weavers Church" on Nov. 8, but we are not told what the meeting was about.

December brought special Mennonite meetings as the pioneer Mennonite evangelist and native Virginian, John S. Coffman, son of Middle District bishop, Samuel Coffman, held meetings at Weavers and Bank. Coffman preached a "wonderful sermon" at Bank to "a very large crowd," says Shank. So the next two evenings they went again to hear Coffman.

The tired evangelist was in poor health and this is believed to be his last trip to Virginia to his boyhood home. Within seven months Coffman passed away. Several times before his visit in 1898, Coffman had turned down invitations to come to Virginia, either because of failing health or low finances. Coffman had become a staunch champion of the Elkhart Institute, the forerunner

of Goshen College. He knew there was trouble in the church because Eastern Mennonites and Western Mennonites did not fully trust each other.

Mennonite General Conference had been formed that year (1898) but some eastern conferences were wary of joining and never did officially. Virginia Conference did become a part of Mennonite General Conference. Coffman, however, felt that Virginia Mennonites had fallen into a "formalism" that seemed to elevate tradition to the same level as God's commandments. That was "ruinous to spiritual life," said Coffman. What they needed was teaching, but be gentle in dealing with such people, advised the popular evangelist.<sup>4</sup>

Virginia Mennonites at this time were in deep trouble that was centered in the Middle District. The final result was a separation, as some 70 people were "disowned" as members of the church. Thus it happened that an Old Order Mennonite group developed.<sup>5</sup>

The issues included Sunday schools, revival meetings such as the type that Coffman held, and issues related to leadership. The controversy brewed quite a while and there were many attempts to heal the widening breach and keep Virginia Mennonites in one group. But that was not to be.

<sup>1</sup>Interview with Grace Campbell, April 15, 2004. She was a granddaughter of Michael Shank, and who helped to preserve the diaries and other records.

<sup>2</sup>Early in the Civil War Michael Shank was required to go into the army. From Winchester he wrote a poem to his family. That poem was published in the Winter 2004 issue of *SMH* on page 3.

<sup>3</sup>Photocopies of the marriage licenses for the second and third marriages are located at the Menno Simons Historical Library, Eastern Mennonite University.

<sup>4</sup>James O. Lehman, *Lindale's Song: A Century of Harmony, Growth and Fellowship, 1898 to 1998*. Harrisonburg: Lindale Mennonite Church, 1998. 44-45.

<sup>5</sup>Harry Anthony Brunk, *History of Mennonites in Virginia: 1727-1900*. Harrisonburg: Published by author, 1959, 460-518.

## A Sample of Shank's Handwriting Dec. 31, 1898

The old year with all its joys and its sorrows, its prospects and its disappointments, is about to be ushered into the past, and many friends and loved ones have gone with it to meet us no more on Earth. But God has graciously spared our lives to see the close of this year. All honor and praise to Him who holds our destiny in His hands. I now bid farewell to the old year, with bright hopes and good cheer for the new year. Amen.

# Michael Shenk Family Poem Regarding the Tragic Deaths of 1884

1. Happy were we joined together,  
With the family circle filled,  
Striving still to do our duty,  
As the Lord and Master willed
2. Surely we have seen misfortune  
But it draws us nearer God;  
For we know that whom He loveth  
Often feels the chastening rod.
6. First that went was dearest mother;  
Long we hoped that she might stay,  
For with gentle hand she led us  
Safely 'long life's thorny way.
8. From her lips fell words of wisdom  
Oft she gave the loving kiss;  
But our mother now is resting  
In the world of endless bliss.
9. Still our Abbie, fairest sister,  
Yet remained a while to stay;  
But death's dart again was fatal,  
And she also went away
10. She had reached her youthful zenith,  
Just had passed her twentieth year;  
Life, indeed, with her seemed happy,  
Nothing gloomy, nothing dread
11. Full of bright hopes for the future,  
Many were the dreams she had;  
These like all of youth's bright fancies  
Kept her heart from being sad.
12. All her earthly joys and fancies  
All her hopes had shown so bright,  
Loath at first, but all she yielded  
To death's cold and chilling blight.
13. She had hoped to soon be able  
To wait upon her father dear,  
To tend him in his present illness  
And his lonely hours to cheer.
14. Oft she spoke of the communion  
To be held the tenth of May  
Where her body now, at Weaver's  
Lies beneath the reddened clay.
15. Next our younger sister, Mattie,  
Left our broken family band.  
She did not wish to leave her father,  
Firmly clung she to his hand.
16. Her life was like a cheerful song,  
Or like an opening rose;  
Her days on earth were short but sweet  
So soon her life did close.
18. She will there be with the angels  
Clothed immortal in the skies.  
Still we'd love to hear her prattle,  
See the sparkle of her eyes.
19. Oh, we do not speak with censure  
Why this sorrow us befell;  
The Lord of glory is the worker  
And He doeth all things well.
20. If each again would form unbroken  
The golden chain, the family band,  
Let each be ready then to meet them  
On that bright, that glit'ring strand.

## CORRECTION

There seems to be an error in the last issue of *SMH*, on pages 3-4, in ascribing the poem, "We'll All Go Home" to Michael Shank.

We are told in Michael Shank's archival collection, that he was the author of the 1862 Civil War poem on page 4.

However, under the title "The Prisoners' Song, virtually the same poem was published in S. F. Sanger and D. Hays, *The Olive Branch of Peace and Good Will to Men*: [an] "Anti-War History of the Brethren and Mennonites, the Peace People of the South, During the Civil war, 1861-1865." Elgin, 1907.

This source says that Elder Daniel Miller of Weyers Cave, Va. sent a copy of the hymn to the authors and that it was composed by the prisoners in Mt. Jackson, and that Elder John Kline put the chorus to it while they were in the old courthouse in Harrisonburg. Furthermore, we are told that A. D. Lair wrote the music in 1885. If that be the case, we don't know to what music it was sung in prison.

Here is "The Prisoners' Song" on pages 156-58. There are some differences in wording, but the thoughts are much the same.

(Ed.).

## The Prisoners' Song.\*

Arr. by D. H.

A. D. LAIR.

1. We are in pris - on close con - fined, But this not  
 2. We know it is God's ho - ly will. Our fel - low  
 3. But there is One who reigns on high, He al - ways  
 4. Then let us all the Lord o - bey, And from the

one of us should mind, For Christ has told us in His word,  
 men we shall not kill; That we should lead a Chris - tian life,  
 will to us be nigh, — He will from pris - on us re - deem,  
 truth we'll nev - er stray; So that we all may stand the test,

CHORUS.  
 That we should al - ways trust the Lord.  
 And not en - gage in war and strife. We'll all go home as soon as  
 If we will put our trust in Him.  
 And when we die, go home to rest.

treed, A ho - ly life with God to lead, — Yes, we'll go

home, and that to spend Our days in peace till life shall end.

Music from "National Singer," by per. A. J. Showalter, Dalton, Ga.

\*Stanzas composed by eighteen prisoners in Mt. Jackson, Va., in 1862 The chorus was written by John Kline, in Harrisonburg, Va.

## CrossRoads holds annual dinner, welcomes new executive

During its annual dinner meeting April 17 in Martin Chapel of Eastern Mennonite Seminary, the CrossRoads board welcomed Steve Shenk as executive director, reviewed highlights of 2003 and projected plans for 2004.

Paul Roth, pastor of the Linville Creek Church of the Brethren, led the group in singing, and Robert Alley, board president and pastor of the Bridgewater Church of the Brethren, introduced board and committee members, paid tribute to outgoing board members and staff, and thanked the 140 dinner guests for supporting the CrossRoads ministry with their prayers, time, and gifts.

A slide show by Early Photography highlighted Turner's Mill and the dedication service held September 7, 2003, for the 10-acre farmstead at 711 Garbers Church Road. After an inspirational address by Luanne Austin, feature writer the Skyline Section of the *Daily News Record*, interim director Doris Showalter outlined upcoming events:

- A May 21-22 symposium on the Civil War
- A Brethren-Mennonite tour similar to the one offered in the symposium
- A face-off between persons doubling as Menno Simons and Alexander Mack
- A CPS video, discussion and exhibit
- A fall tour of historic homes of interest to Mennonites and Brethren
- Informal worship services in a sunken "garden" at the back of the farmstead
- September 25 presentation by Donald Durnbaugh to talk about differences in the two denominations
- A Harvest Festival in the fall
- Moving the Whitmer schoolhouse from Mathias, West Virginia to CrossRoads

In his greeting, incoming executive director Shenk noted that, "We're on a journey—to share the story of Jesus Christ as it has been lived by the Brethren and Mennonites in the Shenandoah Valley," and to do it with humility, as Austin suggested in her address entitled "Show and Tell."

Austin credited her journey to faith to the loving actions of a friend rather than her aggressive witness. She also affirmed the Brethren-Mennonite vision "to share your faith story," but encouraged that it be done with humility—"the boasting of the Lord" (I. Cor. 1:31).

Check the CrossRoads Web site – [www.VBMHC.org](http://www.VBMHC.org) – and *Chronicles* issues for upcoming events.

J. Allen Brubaker

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