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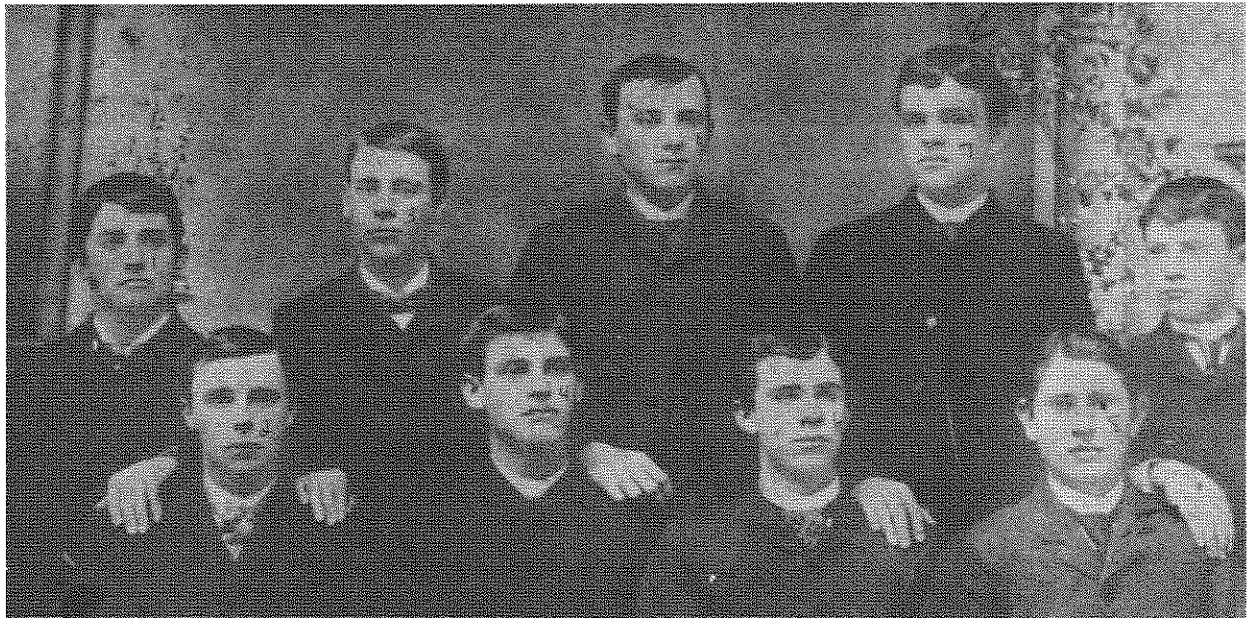
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The "Fence Corner Council" at Mole Hill

On a dark night in 1885, eight young men from Mennonite homes met in a fence corner near Dale Enterprise at the foot of Mole Hill and sat on a log and verbalized their longings for a betterment of themselves and more education. "They were tired but not exhausted; they were in the dark, but were seeking light," says John W. Wayland, the famous local historian, in his *History of Rockingham County* (p. 436).

They organized a society for mutual improvement and they decided to buy books and to talk together about what they read. They began to meet once a week, sometimes in a carpenter shop, washhouse, schoolroom, private home, or in the woods behind Dale Enterprise School. Crude benches were nailed to trees and later tables were built.

Three of them were the younger brothers of the later famous local Mennonite bishop, L. J. Heatwole, writer, almanac author, and weather man for the U. S. government. Their parents, David A. and Catherine (Driver) Heatwole, encouraged their three sons—Aldine J., Timothy O. and Cornelius J. in their pursuits. The other five young men were Frank A. Heatwole, John J. Heatwole, John R. Swartz, William T. Swartz and L. Frank Ritchie.



Tentative Identification; some may be incorrect; Readers—can you help us?

L to R: Cornelius Heatwole, Frank Heatwole, Timothy Heatwole, Aldine Heatwole, William Swartz, Frank Ritchie, William Rhodes, John J. Heatwole, (John Swartz not on picture; Justus Heatwole, far right, and William Rhodes, fifth from left, were not of the first group of eight, but likely joined soon). Photo by Rhodes & Wimer, B'water, VA

Others soon joined the original "fence corner group" and the Dale Enterprise Literary Society was born. It lasted upwards of 20 years. Their first reunion was held 1914.

David A. Heatwole was the son of Abraham and Margaret (Showalter) Heatwole, and grandson of David and Magdalene (Weland), and great-grandson of the 1748 immigrant from the German Palatinate, Mathias Heitwohl. David A. was quite interested in both the Weavers Mennonite Church developments and in local affairs, such as county supervisor, assessor of real estate and president of the West Rockingham Mutual Fire Insurance Company.

The *History of the Heatwole Family* (p. 200) by Cornelius J. Heatwole, included mention of the group and called his father, David A. Heatwole, the "godfather" of the Literary Society, because "he did so much toward the uplifting of many of the young men of that community." At a critical moment and at his own expense he built a nice hall on his farm along the Rawley Pike (Rt. 33 West), so that the organization that at first was called the Dale Enterprise Lyceum Hall, would have a home, says Grace Grove.

This new organization was not appreciated by everyone, says John W. Wayland. "Their motives were misunderstood, their aims questioned, the outcome dreaded, and they were often in straits." But after David A. Heatwole erected a building for their use, the Literary Society flourished. In fact, a woman teacher, Miss Tyreetta P. Minnich, became the group's "godmother," says Wayland.

The Dale Enterprise Literary Society had its share of lively debates, orations, reading contests, and music. The group also collected a small library of classical literature for the benefit of members. A number of men went on to higher education and major positions in their field, often joining the Presbyterian Church; a small

number stayed in Rockingham County. Most likely, only a small number stayed with the Mennonite Church.

The first president of the Literary Society was Timothy O. Heatwole, son of David A. He went on to higher education, and studied dentistry. In 1910, he became dean of the school of dentistry of the University of Maryland, which office he held 15 years. Later he was appointed assistant to the president of the University of Maryland.

He was a member of national and state dental associations (Maryland, North Carolina, Virginia and West Virginia) as well as the Nippon National Dental Association of Japan. He was "considered one of the foremost dental authorities in the nation," claims his death notice in the local paper (April 28, 1949)

His interest in politics landed him on the Baltimore City Council. Later he was elected to the Maryland legislature from the 12th Baltimore city ward.

His brother, Dr. Cornelius J. Heatwole, became famous in the field of education. He was a member of the original faculty of the State Normal School at Harrisonburg (now JMU), which began in 1909. Here he remained as a professor for some years before he moved on to other positions. In 1922 he became executive secretary of the Virginia Education Association, which office he held until he died in 1939. He wrote a major volume, *A History of Education in Virginia* (Macmillan, 1916)

He died suddenly of a heart attack in San Francisco in 1939, but his body was brought back to Harrisonburg, so his request could be honored that he be buried in West Rockingham. The family plot is in the Weaver Church cemetery.

Upon his death the *Richmond News Leader* editor wrote a very complimentary editorial regarding this man who engaged in "tireless work to raise the standards of the Virginia public school system." The Cooks Creek Presbyterian Church pastor and EMC's president, John R. Mumaw, were both

involved at the services held here in Rockingham County.

The John W. Wayland "Everyday Book, No. 1," at the Bridgewater College Library, tells us more regarding this "fence corner group." Wayland thought some 40 young men belonged to the Society in its lifetime between 1885 to approximately 1897 "or later." Years later (1914, 1924, 1934) major reunions were held with printed programs and local and distant speakers. In 1914, Hon. Joseph D. Eggleston, President of Virginia Polytechnic Institute spoke. As for numbers, the 1924 reunion literature lists 50 members. The Bridgewater College Library has copies of the programs and the accompanying lists of members.

Also present at the 1914 reunion were, of course, Cornelius and Timothy Heatwole, along with others who had been involved in the Literary—Dr. Oliver C. Brunk, M.D. of Richmond and formerly superintendent of the Eastern Insane Asylum at Williamsburg; Prof. Aldine C. Burkholder of Tennessee; Frank A. Heatwole, formerly chairman of the Rockingham County Board of Supervisors; Rev. Charles M. Good, a graduate of Otterbein and Yale universities and now a Congregationalist minister in Kansas; and Prof. David I. Suter, a "well-known Virginia teacher." On the program, but unable to attend the reunion was William J. Showalter of Washington, D. C., a "distinguished journalist and author."

The reunion was held at the Dale Enterprise schoolhouse, from which, said Wayland, three new U. S. flags could be seen. "One marked the spot where the fence-corner council was held; another floated from the house of Rev. L. J. Heatwole, [Mennonite bishop] where L. J.'s father, D. A. Heatwole, had lived and where was constructed the building used by the Society. The third flag "floated from the store at Dale Enterprise where, years ago, lived Miss Tyreetta Minnich, a lady school teacher who suggested and inspired the organization."

From small beginnings came this group of so-called "distinguished" people. But the

Virginia Mennonites lost a group of young intellectuals in the two decades of this "fence corner group," that we have described above.

John Wayland tells us that 21 members attended the 1914 reunion. No list is given, but perhaps it included the local Mennonite dirt farmer, Will Rhodes. Only one or two of the original eight stayed with the Mennonites. No one has done a study of the membership of the young men who loved to relate to the Dale Enterprise Literary Society throughout its history.

Bibliography Relating to the "Fence Corner Council"

(Rather than providing too much heavy reading with scholarly apparatus such as footnotes, we list the sources in this bibliography. At some points in the text we indicate the source.)

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John W. Wayland, "Everyday Book No. 1" (diary), and a glance at later "books" of Wayland diaries. Much of his materials reside in the Bridgewater College Library. (Used by permission of Ruth Greenawalt, Director)

Virginia Weaver, Various clippings from newspapers. Some, but not all appear to be from the local paper.



DIVORCE AND RE-MARRIAGE, 1867

Did Virginia Mennonite Conference officials deliberately or accidentally miss printing this unusual action taken on divorce and re-marriage?

Early conference minutes are brief. The conference archives now has five partial sets of handwritten minutes for the 1860s and later.¹ It is clear that these handwritten conference minutes may occasionally say a bit more about the discussions, or in the case of this article, include a very significant action taken by conference, which the published minutes do not contain.

Our example is the September 1867 discussion whether re-marriage was permitted for divorced people. Conference, in this case, took an unusually progressive action that soon put them in crosswise with other conferences of the Mennonite Church.

The first major volume of published minutes (1939) says nothing about divorce and re-marriage for the September 1867 session of conference. Oddly enough, of the handwritten minutes we have for that period of time, no minutes are to be found for that session of conference, except the minutes kept by one deacon, Frederick A. Rodes of the Middle (Central) District. It is he that mentions the discussion and action taken. We know he is correct in including that minute because of the stir the Virginia Conference caused at many places.

The question of divorce and re-marriage had come on the agenda of both Mennonites and Amish Mennonites in 1867. It was raised first by the Amish "Diener Versammlungen" (meeting of ministers) that were very active at that time. In May 1867

they passed a resolution forbidding both divorce and re-marriage.

So the *Herald of Truth*, published by John F. Funk at Elkhart, Indiana, for Mennonites and Amish Mennonites, in September of that year began a discussion of divorce. That was right at the same time as the Virginia Mennonite Conference bi-annual session met on September 27 and 28.

At the Virginia session they had a visiting Mennonite bishop, John M. Brenneman of Elida, Ohio, probably the most outstanding bishop of the Midwest of that time—a leader of wide renown and influence. Though visiting ministers were not unusual, it happened that this session had more visitors than usual. Also present were Jacob Andrews of Lancaster, PA, Michael Horst of MD and Peter Basinger of eastern Ohio. A total of 26 ordained bishops, ministers, and deacons attended this specific fall conference.

In this session, the conference dealt with Sunday school and came up "undecided," then worked on procedures for several kinds of church discipline matters. Toward the end of that conference Bishop John M. Brenneman was given the floor, which was a common courtesy given a visiting bishop.

Says Frederick A. Rodes in fair English and with some spelling problems, "J. M. Brenneman gave a Beutiful admnition to the Breathren to Preach the Lord Jesus testimony same it was agreed that it is the duty of all the Ministers Breathren to go and visit the weak Churches more, which are scatered abroad it was decided and agreed that a man has a right again to mary when he had been divorced from his wife the Cause of fornication."

In later discussion, when the topic really heated up in the church paper, Brenneman freely admits he was the one who raised the question, "not out of idle curiosity," but to "learn and gain information." He wanted to know how other ministers interpreted the scripture on this issue. After discussion of the question, Virginia Mennonites affirmed that it was permissible for a man to "put away his wife." Then the conference decided

further that if a man is allowed to divorce his wife for fornication, he is allowed to marry again.

However, two weeks later on October 12, the Indiana Conference (which Brenneman usually attended and over which he had influence) came to the opposite conclusion.² If a man has parted with his wife and married another, he cannot be received as a member unless he "puts away the second woman."³

Now Brenneman felt badly. He was known to be a very humble man, so he apologized. He regretted that he had triggered this disagreement and he pleaded for his fellow brethren to forgive him. But he continued the discussion in a long article in the *Herald of Truth*, where he gently asked for scriptural reasons for either stand. Significantly, he ended the article with the statement. "I must confess that I cannot yet see that the decision of the Virginia Conference is so great an error as some persons seem to think."

By now a storm of protest had arisen. John F. Funk, editor of the *Herald of Truth*, had received "a large number of letters making inquiries and objections to the decision of the Virginia Conference." That came about partly because Frederick Rodes had published in the November 1867 *Herald* what the Virginia decision had been.

So, in January 1868, Funk did an editorial, noting the opposite conclusions of two conferences. He said he wouldn't pretend to know which conference had interpreted the scriptures correctly. "But now let us carefully and prayerfully consider the matter and hear each other's views."

However, Brenneman's article, which followed Funk's invitation to have the issue discussed, had only added fuel to the "fierce fires of opposition to divorce for any cause." Ironically, Brenneman's own Ohio Conference in May 1868 "unanimously" agreed that the gospel gives no license for either a divorce or to re-marry again. At that Ohio meeting some thirty bishops, ministers and deacons from Ohio, Indiana, Pennsylvania and Canada attended!⁴ Brenneman surely must have

attended that conference, so if the resolution was "unanimous" he must have done an about face on the issue, in order not to be in disagreement with his brethren.

In July 1868 Brenneman wrote a short article, "I Beg Pardon" in the *Herald*. He refers to his "awkward article on divorce and marrying again." He was so sorry that he had "made known his thoughts" on the subject and brought such pain. "I wish to do nothing but the holy will of God," said he. However, he still asked for more light on "that which is yet dark to me."

Despite the criticism Virginia Mennonites received from Mennonites elsewhere, no record exists of Virginia Mennonite Conference retracting the 1867 resolution within a number of years. In April 1868, Jacob Geil noted, "The subject of marriage taken up, and thought best to not take the vote on it." (published minutes say nothing) In all likelihood this refers to discussions in later conference sessions whether it was appropriate for ministers to marry persons "not members of our church."

Later (1874) arose the question of a Mennonite marrying a person that is not Mennonite. It was decided not to "change the old rule" made by Peter Burkholder, Abraham Neiswander and Daniel Good. In their handwritten minutes Michael Shank and Jacob Hildrebrand say that people should marry "honorable, respectable and moral persons." Published minutes say it is permitted "provided such persons are in good standing in society, and possessed of a good moral character."

¹Records kept by three deacons, Frederick Rodes, Jacob Geil, Michael Shank, Anthony P. Heatwole (first a deacon then a minister) and bishop Jacob Hildebrand. Shank and Heatwole minutes are later than the 1860s.

²*Herald of Truth* 5(February 1868), 26.

³John Umble, "Early Conditions Leading to General Conference," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 3(January 1929), 15.

⁴Umble, 18.

Park View Church Celebrates

PVC is celebrating its 50th anniversary as a congregation this year. A three-day event is planned for November 28-30. To mark the significant milestone, a history written by Harold D. Lehman entitled "Through These Doors: A Journal of Faithfulness. It describes the early development of a congregation on the campus of EMS/EMC until its recognition as a group in 1953. PVMC moved to its present location in 1968 and expanded its facilities in 1995.

Activities begin Friday evening at 7:00 with a concert by PVMC members and former members. Saturday evening promises a fellowship dinner and program, including activities for children. Sunday morning worship begins at 9:30. A group of "alumni" will join present singers to participate. A fellowship time follows at 11:00. More information is available on e-mail office@pvmchurch.org or by phone 434-1604. Everyone is welcome but please forward your intentions. *Jay B. Landis*

10 Things Learned While Writing the History of PVMC

1. That the college church, located on the border between two large districts of Conference was an anomaly.
2. That the organization of PVMC on the college campus worked surprisingly well.
3. That our congregational move to North Park View had a significant impact on the campus church.
4. That good humor was never far away.
5. That our music program was a prime case study in decision-making.
6. That the move to a salaried professional ministry affected pastor-church council-congregational relationships in important and interesting ways.
7. That we came through the social changes of the past half-century without any major rift.
8. That God provided the pastoral leadership needed at PVMC each step of the way.
9. That history does indeed repeat itself, but the path of faithfulness takes many a twist and turn.
10. That the story of PVMC is a work of beauty.

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Valley Brethren-Mennonite Heritage Center News

Some 600 people gathered Sunday, Sept. 7, (a gorgeous day) on the hillside of CrossRoads (VBMHC) to dedicate the site as a place to celebrate and share the Brethren and Mennonite faith heritage.

After some music, Al Keim and incoming director Doris Showalter welcomed everyone to this historic event. Following Shirley Yoder Brubaker's reading of portions of Psalm 104, Philip C. Stone, Sr. and Myron Augsburg highlighted the need and value of such a center.

Robert E. Alley, pastor of the Bridgewater Church of the Brethren, then noted how Brethren and Mennonites have journeyed together over the past 300 years. "Here at CrossRoads, we and those who visit, will meet people who have made a journey in faith and conscience," he said. "We will witness the light in the stories of their journeys."

He reflected further, "Each of us faces crossroads-- occasions when we must make decisions, some of them simple and others very complex; some affecting other people and some only ourselves; some crossroads call us to the very depths of our being and we wrestle with what gives life meaning and hope, what we really believe in and trust." Some crossroads we choose; others are thrust upon us.

After the formal service at 4:30 p.m., guests toured the 1854 Myers-Burkholder house to view exhibits and then enjoy refreshments in the warm evening sunshine. Volunteers continue to help restore the house.

In early October, CrossRoads moved its offices to a residence on the edge of the 10-acre campus at 711 Garbers Church Road. Named the Welcome Center, it is being renovated to host visitors and provide office space. Staff welcomes volunteers to help renovate the Welcome Center and the historic old house. Call 438-1275 or write PO Box 1563, Harrisonburg, VA 22803.

Allen Brubaker

It's time to renew your membership for 2004

Dues: \$10 per couple; \$6 per single. Contact Jim Rush, 780 Parkwood Drive, Harrisonburg, VA 22802, or call (540) 434-0792. E-mail rushj@emhs.net

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