



Shenandoah Mennonite Historian

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One Generation shall Praise Your Works to Another

In August 1919, the Mennonite Church Conference (MC), a national body, met in Harrisonburg, Virginia. Approximately 1000 people attended, many arriving at Assembly Park by train. They came on the “Crooked and Weedy” train, as described by Gary Smucker in this issue.

George R. Brunk I, from Denbigh, Virginia, attended the national gathering. Most likely, Amos D. Wenger came, as hundreds from Virginia Conference attended the August 1919 Conference.

At the end of the July 2023 Virginia Conference Assembly held in Park View, close to the site of the 1919 national gathering, I pondered the passing of the Moderator’s office from A. D. Wenger’s granddaughter to George R. Brunk I’s great-grandson. The Virginia Conference is different than in 1919, but some legacies continue.

Elwood Yoder, Editor

Park View Mennonite Church, Harrisonburg, Virginia (above). Park View was established in 1917 and became independent of the college in 1953. Park View is in the Harrisonburg District of Virginia Conference. Photo by Elwood Yoder, 2023



Virginia Mennonite Conference Moderator Sara Wenger Shenk gave a gift to incoming Conference Moderator Andrew Fairfield, on July 15, 2023. Sara Wenger Shenk is a granddaughter of Evangelist Amos D. Wenger, the second president of Eastern Mennonite School. Andrew Fairfield is a grandson of Ruth Brunk Stoltzfus and a great-grandson of George R. Brunk I. Virginia Conference met at Park View Mennonite Church, where the Editor was a congregational delegate.

Photo by Editor, 2023

IN THIS ISSUE:

- *APOLOGY TO THOSE IMPACTED BY THE BANNING OF MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS IN VIRGINIA CONFERENCE*, BY KATHLEEN WEAVER KURTZ
- *THE CROOKED AND WEEDY*, BY GARY SMUCKER

Apology to Those Impacted by the Banning of Musical Instruments in Virginia Conference

By Kathleen Weaver Kurtz

In 1927 Virginia Mennonite Conference banned musical instruments in the homes of ordained ministers and Eastern Mennonite School (now University) faculty members. Although the ban was rescinded twenty years later, it caused grief to many people while it was in force. This included members of my family. In December 2022, almost one hundred years after the ban, a new chapter of the story was written as an apology for the harm that had been done.

My family's musical story began more than a century ago in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, where Daniel and Magdalena Lehman raised nine children, the youngest of whom was my grandfather Chester. Most of the Lehman children attended Millersville State Normal School to become teachers, and part of their training was in music.

The entire family loved music. Daniel taught singing schools in many places. A parlor organ was the center of much family activity. The children learned to play, not just proper, stately hymns befitting their preacher/bishop father but the popular music of the day. They also made up songs of their own which they attempted to play even in old age, accompanied by much laughter and joking. Music was fun, worshipful, and something that drew their family together.

Annie, the oldest daughter, and her

husband, A. D. Wenger, moved from Lancaster County to Fentress, Virginia, in 1908. There the thinking of A. D.'s brother-in-law, George R. Brunk I, held sway. Brunk believed it was wrong to have musical instruments and pushed Virginia Mennonite Conference to pass a rule forbidding ordained ministers to have musical instruments in their homes. Annie, who loved to play the organ, had a hard decision to make—whether to stir up trouble or sell the small parlor organ her parents had given her as a young woman. She chose to sell it, but that didn't keep her from crying when a man came to take it away. One of her granddaughters recounts the story that was handed down. "Grandma started to cry [when the men came to pick up the organ] and the man said, "Well, if you don't want to get rid of it, you can have it." Grandma said, "No, take it, take it."¹ Of the loss of Annie's beloved organ, her daughter said:

I never heard her complain one word [about the organ]. She was a Minister's wife, and she was going to live it. She loved singing. Besides having music at home, she taught some singing schools in the Fentress community. She welcomed the chance to play an organ or piano in homes they visited. She'd gather people around to sing hymns while she played.²

Even her playing in others' homes was disapproved of. After Brunk wrote a letter to Annie's husband, A. D., expressing disapproval of her doing so, Annie responded directly to Brunk by letter:

I did not know that playing while others sang "was promoting a wrong spirit" . . . I am sorry I have offended you

1. Lois M. Lehman and Rhoda E. Cressman, *A.D. & Annie: Stories, Letters, and Memories of A. D. Wenger and Annie Lehman Wenger, their Families and their Descendants*, p. 225. All quotes from this book used with permission.

2. Loc. cit.

...

I always enjoy singing, and when there is an instrument around, it is so much easier to get started in singing. Last Sunday we visited in a home, and for Edna's sake we had no music nor singing except when we were nearly ready to go, [my son] and I sang one song while I played. Since a child I have played, and it is so much easier to learn a song in that way than by note [reading] . . . I am happy and satisfied without [a piano]. I gave it up for your sake and am sorry if I fail to please you.³

Three more Lehmans made their way to Virginia. Elizabeth came to Harrisonburg to teach in the new school in 1919 but taught only a year before marrying John Kurtz. In 1921 Daniel and Chester followed, also recruited to teach. All three of them brought with them their love of music. Daniel had a small parlor organ and a violin. Chester brought with him books of bass arias and art songs, piano music, and choral music from his years of voice lessons and choral work. As soon as he was able, he bought a piano. The musical tradition thrived on College Avenue, Harrisonburg, where the three siblings lived in three houses built in a row.

Then came the piano ban and both Daniel's and Chester's musical instruments had to go. Daniel took his organ apart and the pieces lay around for years as scrap wood.⁴ He took his violin to the attic and never spoke of it to his family.⁵

Chester's daughter Miriam (Lehman Weaver) remembered vividly the loss of their

piano. She wrote:

I was so young when we got our piano that I have no clear memories of getting it. I think we had the piano about a year. . . I did not play but always had in mind that when I was a bit older there would be piano lessons and I looked forward to that with much anticipation . . . I loved music and loved to hear my father play. Mother played some too but not as often.

However, there came a day when we children were told that we would no longer have our piano--it had to go. Why, we wondered. I do not recall that we were told why. All I know and remember is the tremendous sadness I felt. I remember the piano sitting on the back of the truck that was to take it away and a black man from the store standing at the keyboard and playing something and I looked longingly at our dear piano as the truck moved down the driveway and out into the street . . . how would I ever learn to play?

For me, there were profound feelings of grief connected with the loss of our piano. . . I felt very unfairly discriminated against. I used to hatch elaborate schemes whereby we could get around this restriction by putting the piano in the attic where no one else could see or hear it, or even putting it in the chicken house behind our house. As a compensation for not having a piano in our own home, I took every opportunity to play when we went visiting in homes that had pianos or organs. When we visited our grandparents' homes in [Pennsylvania], I spent hours playing all the songs that I could in the keys of C, G, and F--playing them by

3. Ibid., p. 339.

4. James D. Lehman, personal interview, 2017.

5. Harold Lehman, personal interview, 2016.

[shaped] note since that was the only way I could read the scores at that time. . . I was very jealous of other girls who could take lessons and play really well.⁶

Up the street Elizabeth's daughters felt similarly deprived. Betty (Kurtz Deputy) recalled that every year at Virginia Conference time she and her four sisters "jumped on Papa (who was also ordained) to get musical instruments back again."⁷ Betty could not understand, when the Bible "was full of instruments—lutes, lyres, harps, trumpets."



Chester and Elizabeth Lehman playing at a family gathering in 1952.
Photo from Kathleen Weaver Kurtz

How could they be considered so wrong? Finally, in May of 1947, the Virginia Conference rule on pianos was reversed. According to family legend both Chester and John Kurtz went out that same day and bought pianos. Both families lived frugally, and it is an indication of the importance of having a piano that each of these men found a way to buy one immediately.

When the brand new Acrosonic (Baldwin) spinet was delivered to the Kurtz house, "The look on Mama's face was radiant. . . radiant," Betty recalls. She remembers how much her

6. Miriam Lehman Weaver, written for "Quietly Landed," a musical theatre production by Carol Ann Weaver, premiered Nov. 4, 1994 at the Quiet in the Land Conference at Millersville University (where Annie, Elizabeth, Daniel and Chester had studied many years earlier).

7. Betty Kurtz Deputy, personal interview, Oct. 4, 2017.

8. Myra K. Lehman, family letter, June 25, 1947.

family enjoyed having a piano. On days when her father worked at his desk and was ready for a break he would call out, "I want to hear some playing and singing." Elizabeth would drop her work and go to the piano. Betty and her sisters stopped whatever they were doing and came to stand around the piano and sing several songs as their mother played. In the years after John's death Elizabeth spent many hours at the piano playing her way, song by song, through the hymnal multiple times.

Chester's wife Myra wrote about the piano to her daughter Miriam, who was by that time married:

Papa (Chester) surely is enjoying [the piano] and so are the rest of us. On Monday night Rob said, "Well, I reckon I must go and see Geraldine about taking lessons," so straight way he went, changed clothes, went up to Hartmans and came home later saying that he has arranged to start [in] two weeks . . .⁸

Daniel did not act as quickly as Chester and Elizabeth, but when he retired, his violin again appeared from the attic. He was able to enjoy playing with one of his grandsons who by that time was taking violin lessons.

For Annie, their oldest sister, who had sold her beloved organ when she moved to Virginia, the change came too late. She lived her last years with her daughter Mary, whose daughter Joanne wrote:

. . . I remember that whenever she finished eating, Grandma would tap her fingers on the table to a rhythm as though she were playing piano . . . [After high

school] I went to work full-time at EMC (now EMU) in the cleaning department. It didn't take me long to save enough money to buy a second-hand piano. I hoped it would be a great consolation to Grandma



Daniel W. Lehman playing his violin at a family gathering 1962.
Photo from Kathleen Weaver Kurtz

to have a piano in the house where it would be easily accessible for her to play. We placed it in the parlor next to her bedroom. She was eager to play it, but when she tried, she

discovered that her fingers were too stiff to play anymore. . .⁹

By 2022 most of those directly affected by the piano ban were gone, but their stories lived on into the next generations, and the children of George R. Brunk II heard some of them, primarily from the Weaver sisters (daughters of Miriam and granddaughters of Chester Lehman). The Brunks wrote an apology for the actions of their grandfather George R. Brunk I and their father, George II, who upheld his father's beliefs around the use of musical instruments. They addressed their apology to Dorothy Lehman Yoder, the only living daughter of Chester and Myra Lehman, and to Kathleen Weaver Kurtz, Carol Ann Weaver, and Dorothy Jean Weaver who had grown up hearing their mother's story and living with the sense of loss it created in her life. The apology also broadened to include all who had been

affected by this ban.

The Weaver sisters accepted the apology and responded to the Brunk family with a letter that included this closing paragraph:

None of us can change the past, but all of us, both your family and ours, have come from those years of restriction with perhaps an extra measure of determination to make the most of all creative opportunities, especially musical ones, evidenced in part by the number of music lovers and professional musicians within our families. What a gift to have emerged from these sad circumstances!

- Please save November 11 for our Annual Historians Meeting. We will reflect on Anabaptism at 500 years.
- Renew your annual *Historian* membership and subscription by calling Jim Rush, or mailing him a check, with details on the back of this issue. The annual subscription fee covers printing and postage costs. Thank you for being a member!
- Watch for articles and photos in the next issue about Park View Mennonite Church during the 1950s. Park View became independent from EMC seventy years ago, in 1953. A second article will highlight the 2023 centennial celebration of Morning View Mennonite Church, Singers Glen, Virginia.
- If you have an article or photo for the *Shenandoah Mennonite Historian*, contact the Editor, Elwood Yoder, at elyoder@gmail.com

9. Lehman and Cressman, p.366.

The Crooked and Weedy

By Gary Smucker

“The Crooked and Weedy” was the nickname of a railroad that ran through the heartland of the Shenandoah Valley where Anabaptist groups lived. Chesapeake Western Railway was the actual name of the railroad. On July 5, 1895, the first locomotive for the Chesapeake Western rolled over the rails.¹ At its largest expansion the railway ran from Elkton through McGaheysville to Harrisonburg and on to Bridgewater and Mt. Solon, then to Stokesville at North River Gap. Another railway branch ran south from Harrisonburg through Mt. Crawford to Staunton.

The Chesapeake Western had good connections to other railroad companies. In Harrisonburg, it connected to the Southern Railway to the north, in Staunton to the Chesapeake and Ohio which ran east and west, and in Elkton to the Norfolk and Western. W. E. D. Stokes, who built the railway, planned for the tracks to run through the North River Gap to the coal fields of West Virginia to deliver coal to the port at Newport News, but that part was never built. The railway prospered in the 1930s, and eventually became part of the Norfolk and Western Railway system.²

The railway served Rockingham County and the north part of Augusta County to Staunton. The new transportation method for passengers and freight was a blessing to the Mennonites and Brethren and others who lived in the Shenandoah Valley, and it provided connections for people and goods to the rest of

the continent.

One example of how the Chesapeake Western served the community was the Brethren Annual Conference of 1909. The meetings were held at Assembly Park which was located where the southern part of the Virginia Mennonite Retirement Community campus is today. Assembly Park was developed by A. P. Funkhouser, a United Brethren minister, and was used for camp meetings, festivals, and horse racing. The first classes at Eastern Mennonite School (now Eastern Mennonite University) were held at Assembly Park and the village of Park View that developed west of Assembly Park took its name from the park.³ Assembly Park was near the Southern Railway tracks and passengers could arrive and depart from Assembly Park on the railroad.

“The Great Brethren Meeting” is what Charles Grattan Price Jr. called the 1909 Annual Conference in his book about the Chesapeake Western Railway. According to Grattan Price more than 10,000 Brethren descended on the area. At the time Harrisonburg had a population of around 5,000 people and there were not nearly enough public accommodations for that number of people.⁴

Brethren and probably many of their neighbors in Shenandoah, Rockingham, and Augusta Counties hosted the guests. “Some rather imaginative steps were taken to make certain the visitors were accommodated with places to eat and rest.”⁵ The railways operated shuttle services picking up passengers at the farmhouses along the railroad in the mornings

1. Charles Grattan Price, *The Crooked and Weedy: Being a Very Informal, Illustrated History of Virginia's Most Un-Common Carrier--Chesapeake Western Railway* (Harrisonburg, Va.: Shenandoah Valley Chapter, National Railway Historical Society, 1992), 15.

2. <https://www.american-rails.com/>

3. Donald B. Kraybill, *Eastern Mennonite University: A Century of Countercultural Education* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017), 50.

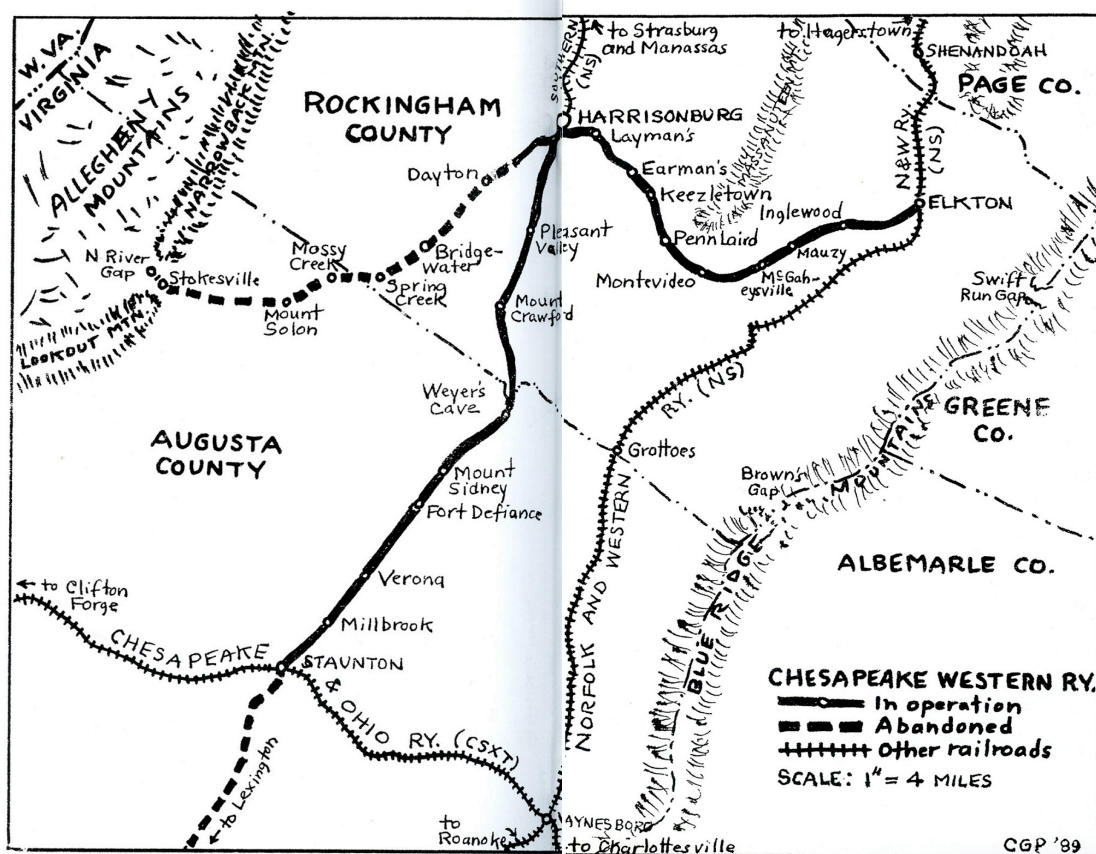
4. Charles Grattan Price, *The Crooked and Weedy*, 1992, 95.

5. Charles Grattan Price, *The Crooked and Weedy*, 1992, 95.

to attend the meetings and in the evenings operating in reverse dropping the guests near the homes of their host families. There were also curiosity seekers who were not attending the meetings and who crowded on the trains to Assembly Park according to the Harrisonburg Daily News.⁶ A complication for the Chesapeake

Western was that to reach Assembly Park their trains had to travel a mile north from Harrisonburg on the Southern Railway line. Special permission was needed to go on another company's tracks. "Incredibly, on top of all these special train movements, hourly 'shuttle' trains were operated throughout each day between Assembly Park and downtown Harrisonburg! No record has been discovered of any significant mishaps during the week-long convention."⁷ Not all attendees arrived by train, of course. People who lived near Assembly Park could arrive and return on horseback or in horse and carriage.

The Chesapeake Western Railway was a definite boost to the economic and social life of the central Shenandoah Valley. The company built a beautiful new terminal building, which has been renovated and



repurposed as offices, and is still in use at the corner of West Bruce Street and Chesapeake Avenue in Harrisonburg. Some of the local lines and services were discontinued, but as part of the Norfolk and Western Railway, the Chesapeake Western still supports the business and economic life of the Shenandoah Valley.⁸ "The Crooked and Weedy" is important to the residents of the area including Brethren and Mennonites.

Gary Smucker has written and published a new book about the two-year adventure of Dan and Frances Smucker in Botswana in Southern Africa. From 1974-76, Dan and Frances Smucker served with MCC in Africa. The Smuckers were nearly sixty years old, not yet retirement age. Gary, Dan and Frances's son, has written a ninety-seven page book with many color photos. You can purchase Gary's 2023 book, *Botswana Buddies*, at [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com), from the publisher's web site, [masthof.com](https://www.masthof.com), or by calling 540-476-2211.

6. *Harrisonburg Daily News*, June 2, 1909, 1.

7. Charles Grattan Price, *The Crooked and Weedy*, 1992, 96.

8. Map above from Price, *The Crooked and Weedy*, 1992, back cover pages.



Virginia Mennonite Conference met at Park View Mennonite Church, Harrisonburg, July 14-15, 2023. Approximately 120 delegates from 60 congregations met for the annual Conference worship and business sessions. Virginia Mennonite Conference includes congregations in Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina, Washington DC, West Virginia, Maryland, and Virginia. The first Virginia Conference Assembly took place in 1835. This photo shows the closing worship service on Saturday, July 15, 2023.

Photo by Editor

The *Shenandoah Mennonite Historian* is published quarterly by the Shenandoah Valley Mennonite Historians, established in 1993.

Officers of the Historians: Chair, James L. Hershberger; Treasurer, Norman Wenger; Secretary, James Rush; Gary Smucker; Gerald R. Brunk; and Elwood E. Yoder, Editor

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If you have an idea for an article or picture for the *Historian*, contact the Editor at elyoder@gmail.com.

Past issues of *Shenandoah Mennonite Historian*, from 1994-2023, can be found at mennonitearchivesofvirginia.net. This site includes a link to over 1,640 photos related to Mennonites in Virginia, and a link to the Editor's history blog.

An annual individual membership fee for the Shenandoah Valley Mennonite Historians is \$10.00 per year, which includes a subscription to the *Historian*. Additional family memberships are \$5 each. Send membership fees to James Rush, e-mail at jameslrush@comcast.net, phone 540-421-7890, or U.S. mail to James Rush, 5736 Brookside Cir., Lowville, NY 13367.