



# Shenandoah Mennonite Historian

Volume 28, No. 1  
Winter, 2020

Published by the Shenandoah Valley Mennonite Historians  
Elwood E. Yoder, Editor

*A quarterly periodical dedicated to the history and culture of Mennonites in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, USA*

## History of Dayton Mennonite Church, 1972-2019

In September 2019, my wife and I attended the funeral of Melba Heatwole at the Dayton Mennonite Church, which was a celebration of Melba's life of service to the church and her family. The visit got me thinking about the history of Dayton Mennonite Church. Hence, I asked long-time friends and members at Dayton, Rich and Lois Rhodes, to write a brief history of the congregation. Their essay is our feature story.

This past fall, Professor Steve Nolt alerted me that he had access to a letter about the 1820s division in Virginia Conference. The letter reveals new information, and you will want to read Steve's essay.

This issue marks my twenty-fifth edition as Editor of *Historian*. After six years of compiling the *Historian*, I continue to be grateful for the trust our officers and members place in my writing and research.

My brother Jason Yoder, from Westcliffe, Colorado, visited me recently while attending a Biblical Mennonite Alliance minister's meeting in Harrisonburg. He listened to me talk about my history teaching and projects, and he encouraged me that doing research, writing history books and articles, and the work of editing is a Christian "ministry."



Dayton Mennonite Church (above two photos) was established in 1972. The Church today is a member of Conservative Mennonite Conference, and attendance in 2019 averaged 225. The current building was constructed in 1999, and is located six miles southwest of Harrisonburg, Va., along John Wayland Highway.

(Photos by Editor, Dec. 2019)

### IN THIS ISSUE:

- *HISTORY OF DAYTON MENNONITE CHURCH, 1972 - 2019*, BY RICH AND LOIS RHODES
- *"HOSANNA! HALLELUJAH!": RECONCILIATION AMONG VIRGINIA MENNONITES, 1828*, BY STEVEN NOLT
- *A MEMORIAL MEDITATION FOR MARTHA SHANK WHISSEN, 1914-2019*, BY HARVEY YODER
- *THE JACOB E. AND ELIZABETH HORST LEHMAN LAHMAN BOOK*, BY RACHEL LAHMAN ROBINSON

## History of Dayton Mennonite Church, 1972-2019

by Rich and Lois Rhodes

### FORMATION and NAME

Prior to 1972, West Valley District (Va. Mennonite Conference-VMC) was made up of thirteen separate congregations. When all the ordained leaders of those congregations withdrew from VMC, and formed the Southeastern Mennonite Conference, there remained an unorganized group of members who chose not to withdraw. A group met several times and requested leadership from the Executive Committee of VMC. John R. Mumaw accepted leadership of the group. By June 1972, the group chose to meet regularly in the Eastern Mennonite Seminary Chapel. The official name of this fellowship became the West Valley Congregation, and there were approximately 65 regular attendees (In 2019 attendance has averaged 225).

In 1974 land was purchased south of the town of Dayton and a church house was built. (A new worship sanctuary was built in 1999). The name Dayton Mennonite Church was chosen for identity with the location and replaced West Valley Congregation in name, officially in January 1975.

### AFFILIATION

The formed fellowship related to VMC through the West Valley District, with DMC as the only church until 1993, when a new district was formed (Mountain Valley District), that included Dayton, Morning View, Bethel and Salem (W.Va.).

In 2002, Dayton Mennonite, along with

the other churches in the Mountain Valley District (MVD), voted to leave the Virginia Mennonite Conference. The MVD focused on a conservative biblical understanding and application for congregational life, that was more normative during the mid-20th century. The 1963 *Mennonite Confession of Faith* had been used as the basic guideline for the MVD churches. The differences crystallized with the formation of MC USA (Mennonite Church merging with General Conference Mennonite Church). The governing attitude and reference point for following Christ, reflected opposing views from the MVD perspective, and were characterized as “experiential theology/ authority” (MC USA) versus “scriptural/ biblical authority” (MVD).

These four churches of the Mountain Valley District along with Faith Mennonite (Southern District) then formed Mountain Valley Mennonite Churches (MVMC). Roman J. Miller was serving as the Overseer of the MVD (VMC). He was chosen as Overseer of MVMC. These five churches functioned as a mini conference in polity and continued to function much like they had as a VMC district. Certain VMC endorsed ministries continued to be supported by the MVMC churches and particularly at Dayton. These included Va. Mennonite Missions (VMM), Family Life Resource Center (FLRC), Mennonite Disaster Service (MDS), Pleasant View Inc., and Virginia Mennonite Retirement Community (VMRC). Dayton’s Church Council scheduled Sunday offerings, that were designated specifically for these ministries.

Dayton (DMC) joined Conservative Mennonite Conference (CMC) in 2014. The desire was for more congregational autonomy and for more direct Mennonite

resources, particularly for its congregational leaders. Dayton had called on many CMC pastors as speakers for their biannual revival/renewal meetings, even during its time with VMC and this practice increased after 2002. CMC has 110 congregations with 12,700 members (2019) in the U.S. It has fraternal relationships with churches in eight countries and is a fellowship of evangelical Anabaptist

hence forfeits church membership. Dale Keffer was asked to serve as Overseer when Dayton Mennonite Church joined CMC.

Each pastor had a significant role in congregational life at Dayton Mennonite Church. John R. Mumaw gave initial authenticity to the congregation. He also was instrumental in compiling and guiding

LEADERS		
A listing of licensed and ordained leaders at DMC		
Oversers	Pastors	Deacons/Ministers
John R. Mumaw (1975-1983)	John R. Mumaw (1972-1975)	Dewitt Heatwole (1977-1983)
Dewitt Heatwole (1983-1991)	Willard Heatwole (1973-1992)	Gerald Heatwole (1990-2009)
Roman J. Miller (1991-2005)	Herman Reitz (1979-1992)	Richard Rhodes (1999-2010)
Arland Schrock (1996-1997)	Roman J. Miller (1990-1991)	Dennis Rhodes (2009 - )
Roman J. Miller (1997-2005)	Nate Yoder (1993-1999)	Roland Horst (2017 - )
Steve Estep (2005-2014)	Willard Heatwole (1999-2002)	Mike Troyer (2017 - )
Dale Keffer (2014 - )	James Rhodes (1994-2005)	
	Daryl Driver (2002-2016)	
	Willard Eberly (2016-2018)	

churches, committed to maturing and multiplying churches locally and globally. It partners with Rosedale Bible College (RBC), a CMC supported educational institution and Rosedale International (RI), a CMC supported mission agency. DMC adopted the CMC statement of Theology and the Statement of Practice in 2018, with two addendums. The first addendum was in reference to submission to God's order, with the continued practice of Dayton women members being asked to symbolically cover their heads during the church worship. The second related to the permanence of marriage and stated that remarriage, when the first partner is living,

the congregation in adopting its initial guidelines. Willard Heatwole served two separate terms. His perspective and church vision, was influenced by long service with VMM in Jamaica, and Albania. He was pragmatic in polity and guided the church ardently through the building of the new sanctuary in 1999-2000. Herman Reitz was dedicated in pastoral visitation, and also had a determined approach to biblical exegesis. He invited numerous seminary students, that preached, gave their personal testimonies and shared how God was leading in their lives, during the DMC Sunday evening services. Nate Yoder could speak decisively, and had

the ability to listen and to encourage those who had been deeply wounded. Persons were attracted to his warmth and wordsmanship. James Rhodes was a churchman. He also was passionate about Anabaptist history, its relevance and the need to promote non-resistance and nonconformity, as important for authentic Christian discipleship. Daryl Driver was thorough in sermon preparation, and had a preaching manner that was easy to follow and doctrinally sound. His intent was that listeners understood that knowing Christ was most important. Willard Eberly brought stability to the congregation during a time of transition. His passion was to see persons mature as followers of Jesus. The congregation has used the Deacon/Minister position for both preaching, visitation and administration. All the persons that have filled those roles have been either licensed or ordained. Mike Troyer (licensed minister) has blessed the church through his preaching gifts, during the past two years.

#### MINISTRIES THAT HAVE BEEN SIGNIFICANT IN CONGREGATIONAL LIFE

##### Rockingham County Jail

Upon the completion of the new Jail facility in Harrisonburg, in 1994, Dayton Mennonite Church, along with several other area churches began holding worship services each Sunday evening there. The women began holding services in 1995 on Monday night. Usually 2-3 persons go and sing/with instruments, preach/teach and pray for those that attend. There are usually around 30 men that attend their services. The women's attendance averages around 4-8. The Holy Spirit has blessed the work of the men, through the wonderful ministry of Jason Wagner during the last several years.

He was appointed by VMM to serve as the jail Chaplain. This past year, there were over 40 men baptized, through the ministry of the Chaplain, and other men from local churches that also participate. Several brothers from Dayton participated in the baptism/anointing of eight inmates. May God be praised for this.

##### Women's Mission and Service Committee (WMSC)

The WMSC started meeting in 1972 (the year that the church began), and continues to assemble/knot comforters and to make quilts for the Virginia Mennonite Relief Sale. They also assemble various kits for Mennonite Central Committee (MCC). An average of twelve women participate. A motto that began at the group's inception "Little is much when God is in it," continues to give focus to the sisters' work.

##### Vacation Bible School (VBS)

The first VBS was held in 1981, for children from the congregation and community. It has continued each year, with the help of many volunteers and the prayers of the church body. The VBS superintendents choose an offering focus for the week, related to a specific mission initiative. The attendance this year was 70 children.

##### Refugee and Immigrant Family Sponsorship

With the fall of South Vietnam in 1975, many Vietnamese became refugees. Dayton Mennonite Church sponsored three separate family units from 1979-1981. The church found work, housing and assisted with schooling for these persons. Several have maintained connection to the church volunteers that were involved in coordinating and helping with their many needs. They are extremely grateful for the assistance provided

for them.

With collapse of the Berlin Wall and the dissolving of the Soviet Union (1989 and 1991), numerous evangelical Christian groups began immigrating to the United States. Dayton Mennonite Church helped resettle four families from 1989-1994. Three were from the Ukraine, and one family was from Kazakhstan. Finding housing, acquiring green cards, schooling and giving monetary assistance was a means where DMC persons ministered to these Christians, who had experienced persecution. Those from the Ukraine were part of a Christian denomination that was not established or recognized by their government. One family member still relates to DMC, while others attend the local Slavic Christian Church.

#### Missionary and Mission Agency

Dayton Mennonite Church was supportive from its inception, of the overall ministry of Virginia Mennonite Missions and lifted  $\frac{1}{4}$  of its offerings for VMM programs. When VMM moved towards designated giving, the DMC council started lifting 6 offerings/year for VMM's general fund and 6 offerings/year for Willard and Eva Eberly, long time VMM service workers in Italy. The Eberly's began their second term of service in 2001 and served 12 years, with the same support arrangement, from DMC. With the return of the Eberly's to the states, DMC has continued its VMM support by lifting several offerings/year for the Steve and Laura Campbell family, serving in Montenegro. Upon the move to Conservative Mennonite Conference, Dayton increased its offerings to both CMC and to Rosedale International, and

began supporting a family through Rosedale International in an identity sensitive region. It also supported Dale Brubaker (DMC member) during his ministry as a Chaplain at We Care Ministries in Alabama. Numerous other



Cemetery stone for Willard Heatwole (1933-2015) and Melba Kiser Heatwole (1934-2019), at Dayton Mennonite Church, Dayton, Va. The Heatwoles were missionaries, church workers, parents, grandparents, and involved at Dayton Mennonite. Their Kingdom lives were exemplary to many.

Photo by Editor, Dec., 2019

persons in mission have been able to share with the congregation their ministry vision and received both formal and informal financial support.

#### Discipleship

Sunday School began at the inception of the church and through the work of many volunteers has been a blessing to the people of the congregation. Small groups have been a part of church life at various points. They have nurtured participants by fellowship and Bible study.

God's grace and providential leading have been evident in the life of the Dayton Mennonite Congregation, and for this we give Him thanks and praise.

## “Hosanna! Hallelujah!”: Reconciliation among Virginia Mennonites, 1828

by Steven Nolt

Virginia Mennonites experienced a painful schism in the 1820s, precipitated, it seems, by disagreement over how to regard German revivalism and whether to shift Sunday worship from homes to meetinghouses. Our chief source of information on this conflict is the memory of Margaret Burkholder Blosser (1804-1895), a daughter of Bishop Peter Burkholder (1783-1846), who late in her life recounted the details to her son, Jonas H. Blosser (1851-19350). Margaret Blosser’s memories, evidently edited in some way by Bishop L. J. Heatwole, were published in the *Mennonite Historical Bulletin* in July 1949.<sup>1</sup>

According to Blosser, the schism happened “early in the year 1825,” a date she linked to events around her twenty-first birthday. The “separation,” as she called it, lasted “about five years.” Blosser reported that about half of the Mennonites in the Shenandoah Valley were uneasy that Minister Frederick Rhodes (1769-1847) attended United Brethren revivals meetings and would, if “called on,” lead prayers in such settings. Blosser did not believe anyone questioned Rhodes’ theology. Rather, they objected to “his manner of preaching,” which seemed to them to imitate a revivalist style, “becoming at times quite earnest and loud” in the style “of the loud and boisterous ways of the United Brethren.” Those offended by Rhodes’ ecumenical activities drafted a letter of protest on Good Friday, 1825. After receiving a mixed response to this protest from the wider

Mennonite community, the dissenters began worshipping separately.

Having divided into two camps, each side spoke ill of the other, which deepened the animosity. The fact that the offended party, led by Bishop Henry Shank (1758-1836), then conducted ordinations and that the group aligned with Rhodes built two meetinghouses – what would later be known as Pike and Weavers – drew the boundaries between the two sides more sharply. After “at least five years, two ministers from Pennsylvania by the name of Smith and Sherrich came to Virginia with the view of establishing harmony between



Weavers Mennonite Church log meetinghouse, 1827-1881, first called Burkholders Church. The name changed to Weavers sometime in the 1850s.

Elizabeth Heatwole Grove chalk drawing

the two contending factions, but met with no success,” Blosser recalled. These men were certainly Daniel Smith (1765-1833), bishop in the Clear Spring congregation of Washington County, Maryland, and Christian Shirk (1771-1831), who had been ordained bishop in 1821 for the Mennonite community near Chambersburg, in Franklin County, Pennsylvania. It makes sense that these men might have been asked to intervene, not only because their Cumberland Valley home was nearer to the

1. “A Statement,” *Mennonite Historical Bulletin*, July 1949, 2-3. All quotes from Blosser, below, are taken from this source. Harry A. Brunk relied on Blosser’s account source; see history of Mennonites in Virginia, 1727-1900, v. 1 (Staunton, VA: McClure, 1959), 79-83. Heatwole’s edits included his insertion into the text that Trissels meetinghouse “was built before the church was divided.”

Shenandoah Valley than any other Mennonite community, but also because United Brethren revivalism had also shaken their Washington-Franklin churches in significant ways.<sup>2</sup>

Blosser named a subsequent visit by “another minister by the name of Peter Eby” as the event that restored “peace and harmony ... in the Virginia Church.” Blosser’s memory here points to Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, Bishop Peter Eby (1765-1843), a powerful preacher and prominent figure, not only in his Pequea Valley home, but throughout the state and beyond. He traveled frequently and at considerable distance to assist with baptisms and ordinations and to mediate church disputes across the North American Mennonite world. His ecclesial activity when visiting Ontario, where his much younger brother, Benjamin Eby (1785-1853), had moved, led to joking back in Pennsylvania, that Bishop Eby’s “jurisdiction extended farther than that of the President of the United States.”<sup>3</sup>

Blosser remembered that Eby had overseen a meeting at Weavers meetinghouse in which the Shank faction agreed that Rhodes had done nothing wrong in attending United Brethren meetings, and the Rhodes’ group accepted as legitimate, the ordinations conducted and new members taken in by Bishop Shank. In Blosser’s memory, this step achieved “the long-sought-for reconciliation ... and the Mennonite Church in Virginia once more became a unit.”

### Margaret Blosser’s “distinct recollection

2. Edsel Burdge, Jr. and Samuel L. Horst, *Building on the Gospel Foundation: The Mennonites of Franklin County, Pennsylvania, and Washington County, Maryland, 1730-1970* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2004), 151, 158-67.

3. John L. Ruth, *The Earth Is the Lord’s: A Narrative History of the Lancaster Mennonite Conference* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2001), 460-63; quote from the time, 460.

4. Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany, NY: State University New York Press, 1991).

5. Martin Mellinger to “Dearly esteemed Fellow-brother Daniel Smith,” Lampeter Township, Lancaster County, Dec. 3, 1828. The letter, now in private hands, was transcribed and translated by John B. Martin, Narvon, Pennsylvania. Mr. Martin is a member of the

of all the incidents” is an exceedingly valuable source for a period with limited manuscript evidence. Indeed, oral history memories have generally proved to be reliable sources, though they tend to record different types of evidence, and thus, different types of history, than contemporary paper sources do: evidence of emotion and sentiment, of connections, of context.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the fact that Blosser thought Smith and Shirk were both from Pennsylvania, when Smith was actually from Maryland, is no reason to discount her story. Ideally, historians hope to match detail-rich memories with contemporary documents. This past summer, such a match became possible. A letter from



Trissels Mennonite Church first log meetinghouse, 1822-1900. Bishop Linden Wenger commissioned this painting for the 150th anniversary of the congregation in 1972.

Anna Mae Pellman painting

December 1828, written by Bishop Eby’s friend and colleague, Deacon Martin Mellinger (1752-1842), surfaced at a public auction and now situates Blosser’s textured memories more precisely.<sup>5</sup>

An immigrant of 1772, Mellinger served as a deacon in the Lampeter Mennonite community (later, the eponymous Mellinger Mennonite Church) east of Lancaster City, from 1790 until his death. He often accompanied Bishop Eby in his travels, though not, in this case, to Virginia, and he maintained extensive correspondence with a remarkable range of contacts.<sup>6</sup>

On December 3, 1828, Mellinger wrote about Eby's successful peacemaking venture in Virginia in a letter addressed to Daniel Smith, the Maryland bishop who had earlier traveled to the Shenandoah Valley with Christian Shirk. It seems that Smith had accompanied Eby, making it Smith's second visit to try to address the schism. Although the letter does not provide a specific date for the reconciliation meeting at Weavers, it was likely mid-to-late-November 1828 because Peter Eby had just returned to Lancaster from Virginia only a day or two earlier. In fact, he had spent the night at Mellinger's house, on his way home. Mellinger was away on church business at the time, but he gleaned details the next day from his stepson-in-law, Abraham Denlinger (1785-1836), with whom he lived and to whom Eby had spoken at length.

Although Mellinger had not accompanied Eby on this trip, it seems the deacon had been quite aware of the discord in Virginia, suggesting that the rancor in the valley was broadly known. Earlier, when a Mennonite from Skippack (Franconia Conference) in eastern Pennsylvania had averred that prospects for reconciliation in Virginia were "unthinkable," Mellinger had countered that he "had always

lived in faith and hope there would be a unification." In any case, the fact "that the two parties came to agree as one" now caused Mellinger "to say praise and thanks to the Lord."

An unrelated matter offered Mellinger yet another opportunity to reflect on the restoration of peace in Virginia. Apparently, Bishop Smith had sought to forward some money to Mellinger, perhaps to pay for copies of the *Unpartheyisches Gesangbuch* hymnal, the reprinting of which Mellinger was overseeing, but the money had never made it to Lancaster, having gotten "into the wrong hands." Mellinger now told Smith that in light of the news of reconciliation, Smith should not bother trying to figure out what became of the missing funds. "It is satisfaction enough to me that the brethren [in Virginia] have agreed," the deacon announced, and that news "far outweighs the value of the [missing] money." On the contrary, if peace was something one could buy, Mellinger would always be the first to pay: "If peace with the Virginia brethren could not have been made without money, I could indeed have contributed much [money] to it." However, reconciliation was a process of mutual submission, as seen in Genesis 32 and the case of "Jacob and his brother Esau." In their case, conflict was defused by Esau's decision to "say nothing but what is friendly to Jacob." That approach, Mellinger told Smith, "is what you did with the Virginia brethren, and have won [them]."

After reporting bits of news regarding family and friends, Mellinger returned to the subject of the Virginia matter: "I think [again] of your Virginia visit at this time; it should never be forgotten by you nor the Virginians because

Groffdale (Old Order) Mennonite Conference. All quotes from Mellinger, below, are taken from his translation.

6. Steven M. Nolt, "Mellinger, Martin (1752-1842)," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. September 2019, [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Mellinger,\\_Martin\\_\(1752-1842\)](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Mellinger,_Martin_(1752-1842)).

it always looked so cloudy and stormy with them these past years, and how tedious and discouraged they were among themselves, and finally out of the cloudiness, the eyes of the spirit were opened. It seems to me I could say with them, ‘Hosanna! Hallelujah! Praise be to the God of Israel, who said, ‘Let there be light.’”

The reconciliation in Virginia was not forgotten, at least not by Margaret Blosser. If she was correct in dating the schism to 1825, when she was twenty-one, then it seems that the division lasted only three or three and half years, until November 1828. If, on the other hand, the division persisted at least five years, as she also believed, then it must have originated in 1823. In either scenario, the details embedded in her memory many decades later and the news reported by Martin Mellinger a few days after Eby’s visit, combine to present a picture of ecclesial reconciliation in 1828 that brought considerable joy to those in the valley and to those many miles away.

Virginia Mennonite Churches that began in the 1820s	
Trissels, Broadway, Va.	1822
Pike, Harrisonburg, Va.	1825
Springdale, Waynesboro, Va.	1825
Brennemans, Edom, Va.	1826
Hildebrand, Waynesboro, Va.	1826
Plains, Timberville, Va.	1826
Weavers, Harrisonburg, Va.	1827

## The Jacob E. and Elizabeth Horst Lehman/Lahman History

a 2019 book by Rachel Robinson

Rachel Robinson has written an eighty-four page book about her grandparents, Jacob and Elizabeth Lehman. Rachel, born in 1942, lives near Dayton, Virginia. This book will have most interest to those with interest in the history and genealogy of the Old Order Mennonites in Rockingham County, Virginia.

Rachel began working on this book in 2011 and finished in 2019. There are illustrations and portraits, some in color. The book has spiral binding, and it was published in Dayton.

Jacob E. Lehman (1886-1942) married Elizabeth Horst Lehman (1889-1929). Jacob Lehman’s second wife was Annie Rhodes Lehman (1888-1952).

Copies can be purchased from Rachel Robinson, by contacting her at [erobin23@aol.com](mailto:erobin23@aol.com). Copies are also available for purchase at The Heritage Museum bookstore, Dayton, Va. One copy is available for reading in the Menno Simons Historical Library, Harrisonburg, Va.

The 28th Annual Meeting of the Shenandoah Mennonite Historians took place November 9, 2019. Thirty-one attended. Chairman Jim Hershberger led the meeting, and Treasurer Norman Wenger gave a financial report listing money in checking, savings, and history book funds. Officers elected were Lois Bowman Kreider, Norman Wenger, and Jim Hershberger. Professor Steven Nolt spoke about the context of 1919 such that the Fundamentals were passed in Virginia Mennonite Conference.

## Memorial Meditation For Martha Shank Whissen, Age 105

by Harvey Yoder

*Harvey Yoder was Martha Shank Whissen's (1914-2019) pastor for over twenty years, and he shared these reflections about her life September 24, 2019, at Zion Mennonite Church, Broadway, Va., as a part of Martha's Memorial Service.*

I can't help but be in awe of all of the history Martha witnessed as a lifelong member of this community and of this congregation. She was a woman of faith who came from a long line of faithful believers, many of whom are buried right here in this cemetery where she's just been laid to rest. For over a century she's observed and absorbed so much, and represents a kind of living archive of the story of how God has worked in her life and in the lives of her ancestors and fellow believers.

Which reminds me of Psalm 78, identified as a maskil, or a teaching psalm, with stories of the failures and the blessings experienced by God's people. I'd like for you to hear the introduction to the psalm as though Martha herself were speaking it directly to us.

*My people, listen to my teaching.*

*Pay attention to what I say.*

*I will open my mouth and tell a story.*

*I will speak about things that were hidden.*

*They happened a long time ago.*

*Things we have heard and know.*

*That our people who lived before us have told*

*us.*

*We won't hide them from our children.*

*We will tell them to those who live after us.*

*We will tell them what the Lord has done that is worthy of praise.*

*We will talk about God's power and the wonderful things God has done.*

Martha's life is like a priceless collection of 105 plus years of parables and stories with teaching value that we can't afford to ignore or to forget with her passing. Not that she wanted this service to be a eulogy to her, but to be about stories in which the main character is always God, how God has been at work in people's lives like hers and the many others she lived with and learned from, for over a century.

Martha was born in a house less than a mile north of here which was built on the ashes of one destroyed by fire during the Civil War, a memorial to the devastation and tragedy of that terrible conflict.



Martha Shank Whissen's Eastern Mennonite School graduation photo, 1932.  
Martha Shank Whissen  
photo

And when Martha was only a toddler, delegates of Virginia Mennonite Conference gathered at the white frame Zion church that stood here before this one was built on land donated by her Shank grandfather. With the horror of the Civil War still fresh on their minds, conference delegates on this spot wrote up a statement appealing to Congress, which was about to involve the nation in another terrible conflict, WW I, a part of which reads, "Therefore be it resolved, that we as representatives of the religious body known as Mennonites, who recognize the plain teaching of the Word of God, call your attention to the fact that we cannot engage in carnal warfare, and that, in the light of all good government, it is eminently proper that all matters of national dispute should be settled by arbitration."

These people of so long ago were way ahead of their time. Martha was cradled in their kind of wisdom, of a community of faith trying to be faithful to the Prince of Peace.

Also, as a very young girl, her life was impacted by many of her friends and close relatives, young and old alike, who died of a deadly flu epidemic that was brought over by those who took part in that war, and she would have witnessed the grief of many a tragic and untimely burial here at the northwest corner of the cemetery. She was also very young when Eastern Mennonite School was established in the Park View area, intended to produce people who could truly be a salt of the earth and a light on a hill, now the home of a University and a sprawling suburb on land which was once pasture and plowed fields.

She attended there as a young farm girl, and became the school's oldest living graduate, and later went on to get a teaching degree at a time when not many of her female church peers had the opportunity or the courage to get into that kind of profession, especially teaching in the public school system, much less to later get a Master's degree at Madison College. Meanwhile, she taught generations of children in Zion and other Northern District Sunday Schools and Bible schools. As her pastor, I was blessed by the opportunity to hear many of her stories, along with those of her late husband Clarence.

People like this are a reminder that all of us are a part of a larger continued story that doesn't begin with us or end with us, but is but one part of one chapter of a drama that goes back to the "In the beginning" of Genesis itself, and continues on, generation after gen-

eration to the Revelation of a new heavens and the new earth.

We all need to learn from treasures like Martha, and to immerse ourselves in the life stories of that great cloud of witnesses who have gone ahead of us, each a powerful parable of God at work in imperfect but faithful folks of faith and courage. While experience is a powerful teacher, we don't want to learn



Martha Shank Whissen, at Zion Mennonite Church, 2003, with a lantern that her father, Perry Shank, used on preaching trips into the western highlands.

Karla Souder photo

everything by experience, but rather from people like our spiritual forbears that go all the way back to the stories of God's people told in Psalm 78. We learn from their strengths and their weaknesses, their blessings and their failures. The entire Bible is a book about ordinary Marthas who through faith became parables of God's truth and agents of God's grace.

So we conclude Martha's maskil, the teaching psalm that represents her life, with the words with which J. S. Bach signed each of his musical works, "Soli Deo Gloria," "To the praise of God alone."

That would be Martha's wish, and Martha's last will and testimony.



The Heritage Center Board adopted a revised name and logo in 2019, as seen on the sign along Garbers Church Road, Harrisonburg, at the Center's entrance. The fifth annual Sing Me High Music Festival takes place August 21-22, 2020. This year, Lord willing, the Editor will release his fourth historical novel at the Festival. Set in 1825, the story is based on an actual slave who received emancipation in Rockingham County. The novel has many historical characters from the Valley, including Mennonites, Brethren, and others. (Photo by Editor Dec. 2019)

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  
 Lois Bowman Kreider  
 Gerald R. Brunk  
 Elwood E. Yoder, Editor

Shenandoah Valley Mennonite Historians  
 780 Parkwood Drive  
 Harrisonburg, VA 22802

If you have an idea for an article or picture for the *Historian*, contact the Editor at [elyoder@gmail.com](mailto:elyoder@gmail.com).

All past issues of *Shenandoah Mennonite Historian*, from 1994-2019, can be found at [mennonitearchivesofvirginia.net](http://mennonitearchivesofvirginia.net). This site includes a link to over 1,600 photos related to Mennonites in Virginia, provides a way to subscribe to *Historian* online, and connects readers 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](mailto:jameslrush@comcast.net), phone 540-434-0792, or U.S. mail to James Rush, 780 Parkwood Drive, Harrisonburg, Virginia, 22802.