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The Show Towel of Anna Heatwole Suter

Our feature article in this issue is written by Betty Suter Feldman, a great-great-granddaughter of Anna Heatwole Suter. Anna Suter passed away at age 26 in 1835. Anna Suter has many descendants, but Anna also left a wonderful Show Towel, kept in the Virginia Mennonite Conference Archives, Harrisonburg, Va. Betty Suter Feldman's article provides fascinating insights into the artwork of a young Mennonite woman from the early 1800s.¹

Another work of Mennonite art that survives from the early 1800s is a fraktur that records the marriage and provides a house blessing for Anna Rhodes and Joseph Showalter, married in 1799. It is a rare and unusual piece of Virginia folk art kept in the Menno Simons Historical Library, Harrisonburg, Va.²

A labyrinth with manuscript text and colored illustrations, about 12 x 15 inches, was created by Mary Wenger Geil and presented to her groom Jacob Geil, at their Rockingham County, Va., wedding in 1851.³

We hope you are inspired by the hymns in this issue, and we pray that God sustains each reader during this winter pandemic season.

1. Read more about and see photos of the Show Towel in the Editor's history book about Weavers Mennonite Church, *How Firm a Foundation*, 2015, pages 50-51.

2. View details at <https://emu.tind.io/record/74205>

3. See details at <https://emu.omeka.net/items/show/4>



Trissels Mennonite Church Pastor Harold N. Miller spoke at a dedication ceremony for Virginia State Historical Marker, "Trissels Mennonite Church," November 15, 2020, at the intersection of Route 42 and Trissels Church Road, Broadway, Va. About thirty people gathered for the Sunday afternoon event.

Photo by the Editor

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Bank Mennonite Church (above left), Dayton, Va., November 26, 2020. Bank Church began in 1849.

Photo by Editor

A Treasure at the Archive: The Show Towel of Anna Hiethwole 1826

by Betty (Elizabeth Ann) Suter Feldman

Anna Heatwole Suter (June 4, 1808 – March 12, 1835) was the 10th child and younger daughter of David and Magdalene Heatwole. David Heatwole was the first Mennonite Deacon in the Virginia Mennonite Conference. He had emigrated to the Shenandoah Valley from Pennsylvania and settled on a farm south of Harrisonburg along Rt. 42. Here, at the David Heatwole homestead, Anna lived out her life. In August of 1828 she married Daniel Suter. They made their home at the David Heatwole homestead and had five children. Anna died at her father's home at the age of 26 in 1835, "falling victim to typhoid fever when it first made its appearance in Rockingham County" (Suter 1959, 4). She is buried in the Blosser Cemetery on the Wampler property, Sunny Slope Farm, between Harrisonburg and Dayton, Virginia. Her grave, next to her parents, is marked "Anna Suter."

There are no artist's renderings or photographs of our fore grandmother Anna except a vast number of descendants recorded in our family histories, and a Show Towel she stitched and dated "1826" by her own hand. After display on the stove room door, as was the custom, at the David Heatwole homestead, it surfaced again in the possession of her daughter, Margaret Suter, who lived in her brother Emanuel Suter's home from 1855 until her death in 1922. Margaret passed the Show Towel to her niece, Laura Elizabeth Suter Wenger. Laura passed the Show Towel to her niece, Mary Eugenia Suter, who placed the towel at the Archive of the Menno Simons Historical

Library at Eastern Mennonite University in 1982 when she left her home at the Emanuel Suter homestead. It has been displayed over the years at a Suter Reunion; the Swiss Folk Art Exhibit at the Museum of Frontier Culture in 1992; and at the Heritage Museum, Harrisonburg Rockingham Historical Society in Dayton, early 1990s. Anna's Show Towel is nearly 200 years old. I like to think that the best portrait we have of Anna is her Show Towel.

The Pennsylvania German Show Towel was a "decorated towel not intended for use." The regional use of the towel in Pennsylvania was to hang them on doors as a decoration. They were originally hung on the "stove-room" door. The "stove-room" door was the door between the kitchen and the living room, where day-to-day activities occurred around the warmth of the stove. The door was usually painted red or blue, and had two pegs at the top for hanging the towel. Here it was available for discussion on Sunday afternoons when the examining of the hostess's needlework was customary during visits between households (Gehret 1985, 3-4).

The making of the Show Towel was a folk tradition practiced by adolescent women. They were made using basic sewing tools, taking designs from already prepared samplers. The designs were generally cross stitch or freestyle embroidery of common items such as tulips and birds; numerous cross stitch renditions of fraktur; and some had texts, name, date of birth, and the date the towel was finished. A young woman usually made only one of these towels. The towels were made of white linen which originated in the family flax patch; and were long and narrow in shape. The balanced plain weave fabric was woven 40 or more warp ends per inch. More than 1200 Show Towels

(including Anna's towel on page 4) are documented in the book, *This Is The Way I Pass My Time*. Many towels are similar, but no two towels are alike. Making a Show Towel reached its peak of popularity among the Pennsylvania Germans between 1820 and 1850 (Gehret 8).

The making of towels and other linens was an activity of adolescence in anticipation of married adulthood. The embroidered towel was an exception in a culture that demanded a use for everything. In the Pennsylvania German culture, however, adolescence was a time for self-mastery, and self control. Pennsylvania Germans believed that self-mastery and self control were acquired by making things or doing things. Making the embroidered towel was also a lesson in filling time, particularly the in between time of adolescence. They believed that the best way to understand time was to keep busy doing something. In this way, idleness did not have a chance to invite temptation. Passing time along was done in a gainful manner. Hence one girl embroidered on her towel the phrase, in German, "So kann ich meine Zeit ferdreiven!" ("This is the way I pass my time.") (Gehret 8-15).

Anna's Show Towel is 51 x 19 inches, cross stitched on a balanced plain weave linen fabric. It is one of the very few in the study which is asymmetrical in design. It is nevertheless a well balanced design. The center of Anna's towel is occupied by a Heart, the Noble Heart and a Star. These are surrounded by rows of lovely flowers, hearts, and birds/barnyard chickens of the early American farm. The star, tulip, and heart designs are classic. Each motif is different from all the others. There are enough motifs on the towel to keep one stitching creatively for years.



Anna's Show Towel (pictured above from the Virginia Mennonite Conference Archives) displays a religious symbol, The Noble Heart. It is located immediately above the Star motif and below the large heart motif. The study states: "The design that stands above all others among religious symbols and provokes comment most often features a heart in the center, a crown above, and branches with flowers of sorts extending from the heart. Surrounding the whole in either a clockwise or counterclockwise direction are the initials OEHBDDE (although Anna, as others also, omitted the letters on her towel) (Gehret 205). These are

“the initials for the epigram that is the first line of a couplet that may be from a hymn: O edel Herz bedenck dein End, Wer weist wie nah der Lauf vollend – O noble heart, consider your end; who knows how soon the course is run” (Gehret 205). And additionally, “clearly the pietistic Pennsylvania Germans saw in it a representation of a ‘noble heart’ which had learned the lesson to be learned from pondering one’s demise, a heart which now was ‘awakened’ to true faith and service to God. Thus, the heart supports a crown: ‘Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life.’ (Revelation 2:10)” (Gehret 210-211). Only 8 percent of the towels in the study have some variation of this symbol.

In 1996 I requested permission of the Archive to reproduce Anna’s Show Towel. Gaining permission, I photographed the towel, charted the designs, experimented with color, and stitched my copy of the towel, finishing in four years time. I worked with fabric in hand, without an embroidery hoop, but did use a magnifying lamp. I used DMC Cotton embroidery floss in colors 309 and 470, a rose red and moss green combination. Anna’s towel was stitched in red cotton and what I felt was green silk. I worked the macramé border in the linen fabric. Anna attached a cotton macramé border to her linen towel. I left a long fringe to allow for it to be trimmed over the next “200” years should the edge become ragged. I pushed forward with the work as planned, even when I then discovered the book, *This Is The Way I Pass My Time*, and learned that Anna’s Show Towel had been documented to have been stitched in red cotton and gold silk cross stitch.

In charting the motifs and planning the project I sought the expertise of members of the Skyllkill Chapter of the Embroiderers’

Guild of America (EGA), Hyde Park, N.Y., close to where I live. A needlework shop in Bridgewater, Virginia located a source from which to order the fabric. Knowing the Show Towel was faded from years of light exposure, I wondered how I would figure out the original colors Anna used. A well-known conservator in my area made the comment to me that some things that look gold were originally green. Several EGA members, friends, and I visited an 1890’s local historic site where gold furnishings yielded a mossy green color on the bottom of a chair cushion where the fabric had not seen the light of day for at least 100 years. But Anna’s towel was 174 years old at the time, and was from a different period in time.

Gehret’s study does not address where the adolescent women got their thread other than to say that it was purchased at a country store, and a small percentage was homemade. The study does not discuss the dye process. It does not show gold as a popular color used. Neither does it show the use of green. Most of the study concentrates on the popular use of red stitched on white, and red and blue stitched on white. Another popular form of stitching was white on white, incorporating various forms of white work. Cotton and linen thread were used, with fewer examples of the use of silk floss, as silk was less durable, and more susceptible to dirt, moths, and fading (Gehret 19).

As sometimes happens, continuing to raise a question brings forth more information. Recently Stacey Whittaker, Independent Scholar Researcher for Samplers, Poughkeepsie, N.Y., viewed the photos of Anna’s Show Towel which I took in 1996. She also saw red and green thread in the Towel. She then produced an article on powdered indigo dye of the early 19th Century which was extremely

“fugitive,” so the indigo could easily disappear from a blue fiber, leaving green, which would eventually then fade to gold after washing and/or exposure to the elements. Such an acid dye, Indigo carmine, or Saxon Blue, was invented by Johann Christian Barth in 1743 and used to dye wool, silk, and leather in a splendid blue color until the beginning of the 20th Century (De Keijzer). It is therefore possible that Anna’s Show Towel, if stitched with silk floss dyed with indigo carmine, could have originally been red and blue cross stitch on white, the popular color in Gehret’s study, eliminating the need to explain the difference in the color on Anna’s Show Towel as a regional difference. Anna’s Show Towel was the only Show Towel contributed to the study from the State of Virginia, although others are known to exist. It could also explain why I saw more green in the dark fiber of the floss in 1996; and why, during a photo shoot during the summer of 2019, I could see more gold than green.

The towel is worthy of further study from a needleworker’s point of view. In 1996 I, however, wanted to experience stitching the creation of my great-great-grandmother. I continued stitching in the rose and moss colors. It reminded me of my visit to the David Heatwole homestead in 1995. I was taken there by my cousin, Scott Suter, who had grown up nearby. We left Rt. 33 and drove through Harrisonburg on Rt. 42 to the site. Scott described it as a “pleasant and peaceful place,” and read to us an excerpt from Emanuel Suter’s diary. Emanuel, Anna’s son, and some of his Heatwole cousins had taken the same route on horseback through Harrisonburg to visit his mother’s home. They rested there, noting the bubbling of a wet weather spring Emanuel remembered, and continued on to the Blosser Cemetery to her grave before parting ways to

return to their homes. I shivered, not because of the gentle summer breeze under the great green trees, but because of the peacefulness of this place, and the likeness of the same journey as I looked out over the mossy green meadow where the foundation of David Heatwole’s shoemaker’s shop still lay in the sun.

My copy of Anna’s Show Towel has hung in my home where I have viewed it every day for 20 years. The hearts on Anna’s Show Towel remind me that she was a loving person. The presence of the Noble Heart on her towel indicates that she was a spiritual person, much like our Heatwole and Suter ancestors and relatives of today. And the presence of the star makes me think that she might have also witnessed the stars sprinkled around overhead in the heavens above her home. Certainly flowers and birds were present around her in her life. This is the portrait of Anna that I see displayed in the work of her hands.

I wish to thank the following people for seeing me through to the end of this project: Dr. Scott Hamilton Suter; Eastern Mennonite University and Lois Bowman Kreider; members of the Skyllkill Chapter of the Embroiderers’ Guild of America, Hyde Park, N.Y.; Stacy Whittaker; and my daughter, Lila Rebecca Feldman, who accompanied me on this journey and proofread this paper.

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Bank Mennonite Church and Bishop Lewis J. Heatwole's hymns

by the Editor

In 1849, shortly before the American Civil War, Mennonites along the Dry River began holding services at Bank Mennonite Church. Located in Rockingham County, Va., to the west of Harrisonburg and near Dayton, Virginia, Bank is one of the earliest Mennonite Churches in Virginia.

The first meetinghouse was used until the 1890s, when a wood frame building was constructed for worship. Today a large brick building has replaced the wood frame structure, and is located at the intersection of Hinton Road and Bank Church Road. The congregation has a membership of 168.

Bishops in the past for Bank Mennonite Church have included Samuel Coffman (1822-1894) and Lewis J. Heatwole (1852-1932). Today Nathan Horst serves as Bishop of Bank and nearby Peake Mennonite Church, both churches which are members of the Southeastern Mennonite Conference. Other ministers at Bank include Luke Showalter, Philip Wenger, and Deacon Linden Rhodes.

Today there are two hymn books used at Bank Mennonite Church. *Church Hymnal*, first published in 1927, is used at Bank. A second hymnal in use at Bank is *Zion's Praises*, published in 1987 by Weaver Music Company. With 816 hymns, this fine hymnal is used and sung from in many Mennonite Churches.

Of significance for Virginia Mennonites is the inclusion of two hymns written and composed by Bishop Lewis J. Heatwole, who preached many times at Bank, Weavers, and other Middle District Churches in the early twentieth century. We print the lyrics of these hymns here because of their historic value and their inspirational message for today.

The Christian's Passport, #445, Zion's

Praises

by Lewis J. Heatwole

1) *"The saint who enters heav'n, Who comes of royal birth, Or dwells with all the sanctified, Is first a saint on earth.*

"To walk in heav'n's sunlight, To see its glory there, And he who dwells with all the blest, First sees God's sunlight here.

2) *"Who shines in that bright world, Or wears the blood-washed robe, Finds the first ray of brightness gleam, While yet in this abode.*

"Who joins the jubilee, Or sings with the glad throng, Or shouts with all that happy choir, On earth first heard the song.

3) *"To those who enter heav'n, And rest in tranquil ease, On earth first sought Christ's righteousness, And found His promises.*

"And when they reach the port, The language all aglow, Stands on the passport at the gate, 'You first found heav'n below.'"

Non-Resistance, #730, Zion's Praises

by Lewis J. Heatwole

1) *"The tenor of the gospel word Forbids that men rule by the sword, Is so complete within itself; Think all men better than yourself.*

"The 'eye for eye' or 'tooth for tooth' Forms not a text for gospel truth; For now the law that sways the throng, Leads where the weak equal the strong.

2) *"To regulate the carnal mind, And fully level all mankind, Is to pay with good all evil deeds, And walk the way the Christ-life leads;*

"No civil code of human laws Has yet sustained so true a cause, Which needs no prison house or jails, For keeping this none ever fails.

3) *"The great impulse to Christian pow'r Is best maintained in trial's hour; The test that yields the purest gold, Is live for right and truth uphold.*

"The saint who thus has nobly stood, With hands unstained from human blood, Shall later hear the answer true, 'Enter the joys prepared for you.'"



At just past 150 years in existence, Bank Mennonite Church, Dayton, Va. (above), began in 1849 as a part of Virginia Mennonite Conference. A wood frame meeting-house (right) was built in the 1890s. The photo of Bank Mennonite Church pictured below is found in Professor Harry A. Brunk's collection in the Virginia Mennonite Conference Archives, Harrisonburg, Va. A date with the photo is 1953, and presumably Harry A. Brunk took the photo. In 1972, Bank Mennonite Church joined a group of congregations that formed Southeastern Mennonite Conference. Today the Conference includes sixteen churches in Virginia, West Virginia, and North Carolina, with 846 members.



Top photo by Editor November 26, 2020



Zion Mennonite Church, Broadway, Va., December 20, 2020. During the pandemic, Zion services and meetings have been held online since March 2020. For the special Christmas event pictured above, folks came and listened from their vehicles in the church parking lot, tuning into a local radio station to hear familiar carols sung by family groups. Historian officers James Rush and Elwood Yoder are members of the congregation. Established in 1885, Zion Mennonite Church is part of the Northern District of the Virginia Mennonite Conference, with a membership of 143. Photo by the 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; Lois Bowman Kreider; Gerald R. Brunk; and, 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.

All past issues of *Shenandoah Mennonite Historian*, from 1994-2020, can be found at 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, phone 540-434-0792, or U.S. mail to James Rush, 780 Parkwood Drive, Harrisonburg, Virginia, 22802.