



# Shenandoah Mennonite Historian

Volume 27, No. 3  
Summer, 2019

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*

## Reminisces of the Dewitt and Elizabeth Ann Knicely home

At the 2018 Historian’s Annual Meeting, the Editor met Rachel Robinson. When asked if she had an article for the *Historian*, she remarked that she did. Recently, Rachel submitted our lead article, which begins with a story from the Civil War and comes up to the present. Thank you, Rachel!

A second feature article in this issue is about the way Eastern Mennonite High School moved toward independence from the College in the 1970s. The recent EMU history book missed this important story, and, to make this story accessible for future researchers, we publish this story in *Historian*.

While taking pictures around the Cooks Creek Presbyterian Church recently for this issue, the Editor noticed the church sign which states that founders established their congregation in 1742. It was in that year that the Editor’s Amish immigrant ancestors arrived by ship in Philadelphia. Reading the story of Michael Lahman in this issue, and thinking of God’s providence in bringing my ancestors to a land of freedom, it gives me much gratitude for God’s leading. In response to God, who is our “Fount of every blessing,” as the 18th century songwriter composed, I “tune my heart to sing thy grace.”



**The Dewitt and Elizabeth Ann Knicely house, along Cooks Creek Road, Rockingham County, Va. Our feature article is about the history of the Lahman house, previously located where this Knicely house is now established.**

Photo by Editor, June 2019

### IN THIS ISSUE:

- *THIS OLD HOUSE: REMINISCES OF THE DEWITT AND ELIZABETH ANN KNICELY HOUSE*, BY A DESCENDANT OF MICHAEL LAHMAN
- *EASTERN MENNONITE HIGH SCHOOL MOVED TOWARD INDEPENDENCE, 1964-1982*, BY JAMES RUSH AND ELWOOD YODER
- *SHENANDOAH CHRISTIAN MUSIC CAMP CONCERT*, BY ELWOOD YODER
- *HARMONIA SACRA SINGING AT SING ME HIGH*

**Mill Creek Church of the Brethren, above left, Port Republic, Rockingham County, Va., May 2019.**

Photo by Editor

## This Old House: Reminisces of the Dewitt and Elizabeth Ann Knicely home

by a descendant of Michael Lahman  
submitted by Rachel Robinson

Life stood still for an instant at Weavers Mennonite Church in Harrisonburg, Virginia, one Sunday morning in June 1861. A Confederate captain interrupted the service to proclaim these words, “This is to notify all present of the following: All men between the ages of eighteen and forty-five must report for military training within the week. Our country has need of all her able men in time of war.”

Shock and awe turned to weeping and despair. The war that they’d been hearing about had come to them. What would they do? The desire of their hearts was to live peaceably



From the parking lot of Cooks Creek Presbyterian Church, Mt. Clinton Pike, Harrisonburg, Va., the Knicely house is visible just over the ridge, with white siding and black shingles.

Photo by Editor, June 2019

with all men, not to take up arms against their brothers in Christ.

Many chose to live in hiding; others fled to distant family in the North. Some were arrested and imprisoned for refusal to bear

arms.

Great-great-grandfather Michael Lahman and his wife Annie (Good) were members of the Weavers congregation. The Lahman’s were devout Mennonites who held deep convictions against killing in the name of war. They were also opposed to slavery and secession. In other words, they were “southern in sympathy, northern in belief.”

To Michael, the most peaceful response to conscription was to join the Army as a teamster and not a soldier. He was stationed at Camp Manassas, Virginia. His assignment was to drive the wagon carrying supplies and equipment.

Unfortunately, Camp Manassas was known for its poor living conditions, described as “filthy and vermin-infested, bad water, and rampant with disease.”

In July 1862, there was a lull in the fighting, and Mennonites were told they could go home, tend to their crops, and return in two weeks. During the long, hot and sultry ride home, Michael became so ill with a fever that he could barely sit on his horse.

I imagine that his wife and children were watching excitedly for his arrival. Their excitement would have turned to frantic despair as they watched soldiers in Confederate gray ride up into the yard, with one horse being led, its rider slumped forward in the saddle. What did they feel and think as they watched the painfully familiar man fall into the arms of his comrades and be carried directly to the barn?

“Sorry Ma’am, it’s best he be kept

quarantined. It's typhoid. He would not want to risk you or the children taking sick as well."

While the moon shone through the Valley, distant owls hooted, and swamp crickets carried on their nightly refrain, Michael died alone in the barn. His burial took place also in the night, at the remote Miller Family Cemetery, hidden from the watchful eyes of Cavalry.

Miller Cemetery has long since been abandoned, tombstones tipped and unreadable, but one can still stand quietly amidst the brambles and remember the night our ancestors stood together in their grief. As we ponder our inheritance, we can thank God for the strength of conviction and quality of character of our forefather Michael Lahman.

Michael's death left his wife Annie a widow at the age of 37, with four children, Peter, age 11, David, age 7, Elizabeth, age 5, and Albert, age 1.

Records indicate that at the time of Michael's death, he still owed \$200 on the property. The Goods conveyed the home and property to Annie and her children, with the balance of the debt to be paid whenever the house was sold.

A property deed dated November 10, 1884 shows that Annie, "widow of Michael Lahman, their children Peter and his wife Susannah, David and his wife Mary, and their daughter Elizabeth and her husband Martin Blosser," sold the property to son Albert Lahman for a total of \$333.33, with the siblings getting \$66.66 each and Annie getting \$133.33 which included a widow's pension.

In 1897, a survey by H. A. Heatwole indicates that Peter and Fannie Hartmann were then owners of the home and property. At some later time, their son Jake and his wife Eurie also lived there.

Byard Lahman bought the house and property in 1929. Orpha Horst tells a story of when her mother Artie was a young girl and worked for Byard and Ethel Lahman. The Lahman's had a dairy farm where they sold "Morning Star" bottled milk. Artie had only worked there a couple of weeks when Byard went to help a neighbor fill his silo. She and Ethel were carrying milk bottles in their aprons when the phone call came that Byard had fallen from the silo and broken "about every bone in his body."

At the time of the accident, Byard would



**The Dewitt and Elizabeth Ann Knicely house and farm, formerly the location of the Lahman house, along Cooks Creek Road, Rockingham County, Va.**

Photo by Editor, June 2019

have been almost 44 years old and Ethel 38. They had one son, Harold, who was 18. Their daughters were Mildred, age 16, and Doris, age 8. Ethel gave birth to a daughter, Mary Ethel, a month after Byard's death.

After Byard's death in 1936, Ethel and

Harold kept the farm, with Artie continuing to work for them, as well as other “neighboring help,” milking by hand and selling the milk in Harrisonburg.

Harold continued to farm for his mother for several years. Eventually, he was ordained as a minister, and sometime after that, felt the call to move to a farm closer to his church work in Elkton. He told his mother that he was ready to stop farming the home place.

Ethel then rented the farm out to different families over the years, including David



**Cooks Creek Presbyterian Church, established in 1742, along Cooks Creek Road, Rockingham County, Virginia.**

Photo by Editor, June 2019

Barnharts, Warren Rohrsers, and Willis Rohrsers.

Willis Rohrer farmed the land from 1952 until December 1959, and then the home and property were bought by Howard and Arlene Knicely. When the Knicelys bought the farm, they were the second Old Order Mennonite family to own that far north of Dayton in the Cook’s Creek area. Arlene said, “Just so I can see Mole Hill.”

While Willis Rohrsers were living there, their daughter Evelyn was born—she became

Howard and Arlene’s daughter-in-law when she married their son Dan.

It was on December 31, 1959, that Howard and Arlene moved into “this old house.” They did some painting and took out the back stairway. In 1973, they remodeled and added a new kitchen, bathroom, and wash room, enlarged the dining room, and added an upstairs bedroom. Raymond Wenger, Edwin Eberly, and family and friends helped with the renovation.

In 1962, Jake and Eurie Hartmann and her son Walter came to visit. Jake commented on the “changes, changes.” Eurie said she wanted some “old-fashioned chicken,” which she also wanted to help catch. Arlene offered to kill and dress the hen, but Eurie said, “Oh no, I want to do it!” While scalding and picking, she had a heart spell and went to the hospital. She lived to be 99.

Once when the Knicelys were on their way to Pennsylvania, they stopped at a restaurant. Word got back to the kitchen that people from Virginia were there. The cook came out and asked them where they were from. When they said, “Harrisonburg,” he said that he was too. He gave his name as Carl Keiser and then asked what part of Harrisonburg. They said, “New Erection,” and all were surprised when he said that he was too—in fact, they discovered he was born in their home!

He told how his family had outgrown the original home of two rooms downstairs and two rooms up. They brought in a “shed” and attached it to the back, making a big room down and also one up. There was a partition put through the big room upstairs to make two rooms. In order to get a window on each side,

the partition (wall) couldn't be put in straight, which made a three-corner room. It was separated from the front of the house, so one had to go downstairs and up another stairway to get to it.

The Knicelys told him that Byard Lahman had opened a doorway from the shed part to the front rooms of the house, and Ethel put a bathroom upstairs, in around 1946.

In March 1994, Howard and Arlene Knicely moved to the house just down the road (Fannie Shank's property). Then their son Dewitt and his wife Elizabeth Ann with baby Leah moved into the old farmhouse.

On July 21, 1997, there was a very bad thunderstorm with high winds and hail. After the noise had quieted down, the family looked around in the back yard. There lay the house roof, rafters and all! All of the old two-room portion of the house roof and about of 1/4 of the shed part were off, as well as the old chimney. The storm could have been a tornado as their bunker was flattened, and several neighbors experienced storm damage as well.

With the help of many willing hands of community men and women, in two days, the roof was back on. The men fixed the roof while the women sent in lots of food. They surely did appreciate having a roof over their heads again!

A lot of memories were made in "this old house." One of Leah's was how cold the upstairs was in the winter. During the last winter in the old house, she put a thermometer in her bedroom, and one morning it read 28 degrees. The next night, she put a glass of water on the night stand to see if it would freeze. Sure enough, there was ice on the top the

next morning. Was she ever grateful for thick comforts!

Louise has a memory of the way the halls and rooms were laid out. You could play tag easily, running and making figure-eights through several different rooms and routes!

The steps of the old house were narrow and steep, and the tread of the first step down was more narrow than the rest. Therefore, many people tumbled down those steps.

Arlene tells of a story told by Mary Ethel



From the Dewitt and Elizabeth Ann Knicely farm driveway, Rockingham County, Va., Mt. Clinton Pike can be seen in the photo, middle left.

Photo by Editor, June 2019

(Lahman) Heatwole of the carpenter who put the bathroom in upstairs. He fell down the steps, and her memory was that he hurt himself quite badly.

Dewitt also recalls a tumble down those steps. One Sunday morning, his brother Robert called for him from upstairs. When he got there, Robert gave him a Lifesaver. In his glee to show Mom his candy, he fell down the steps. At the bottom, he discovered he still had the candy tightly clutched in his hand. His children asked him if it rained, and he replied,

“It thunder-stormed,” meaning he cried hard. Howard then put carpeting on the stairs for more grip and padding.

It’s interesting to consider that Byard Layman was getting ready to tear down the old house and build a new one before he died. He had made the last payment and told Ethel, “Now our next thing is to build a new house.”

The house served its purpose for 70 years after he made that statement. In 2009, Byard’s wishes finally came true, and construction of a new house began in the pasture at the south edge of their garden.

Some interesting discoveries were made when tearing down the old house. One was that there was no question that Mr. Keiser’s story was authentic-rags were found between the walls!

Another discovery was found while tearing out the cabinets in the washroom—they were the original cabinets that Howard had removed from the kitchen while remodeling. They scraped at least seven colors of paint off and repaired them. While having them upside down, they found a name and date--Hubert Showalter, February 13, 1946. In 2010 they were reinstalled in the basement of the new house, hopefully for many more years of use.

In April 2010, Dewitt and Elizabeth Ann Knicely and their children Leah, Sheldon, Louise, and Frederick moved into their new home.

## Shenandoah Christian Music Camp

On Sunday evening, June 9, 2019, the Editor and his wife Joy attended the culminating program of a week long choral music training camp. The camp took place at Calvary Mennonite Fellowship, Mt. Clinton, Va., and the public program took place at Bridgewater Church of the Brethren. The instruction program trains young adults to sing excellent acapella music.

The Editor’s niece, Lydia Yoder, attended from High Country Mennonite Church, Westcliffe, Colorado. Two public performances took place in the large auditorium, with approximately 700 people in attendance in the afternoon, and another 700 guests in the evening. Singers and audience members came from many states. The music was outstanding, inspiring, and this 14th annual music camp was a definite success!

More information about the music camp is available at <https://www.musiccamp.info>



Shenandoah Christian Music Camp Concert, June 9, 2019, Bridgewater, Va. From left, Elwood, Joy, and Lydia Yoder, choir member, and Jeff Swanson, Director.

Next page, choirs sang Sunday evening June 9, 2019, at the Shenandoah Christian Music Camp Choral Festival, at the Bridgewater Church of the Brethren, Bridgewater, Va. Photos by Editor



## Eastern Mennonite High School Moved Toward Independence, 1964-1982

by James Rush and Elwood Yoder

In 1952, Samuel O. Weaver's high school English teacher insisted that he learn how to diagram a sentence. Sam saw no need to learn how to diagram a sentence, and he told A. Grace Wenger, his EMS teacher, that he intended to return to Newport News and milk cows for his brother. She replied to Sam that he didn't know where the Lord would call him and that he should learn how to diagram a sentence. Sam graduated from high school, college, and earned a Master's Degree, though sixty-seven years later, in a 2019 interview, Sam laughed and admitted that he still does not know how to diagram a sentence!

In spite of not being able to diagram a sentence, God used Sam in a mighty way during his twelve years as principal of EMHS, 1969-1981. A. Grace Wenger was right—Sam didn't know where God would lead him or in what capacity he would serve the church. It was in the late 1960s that Sam was called to lead Eastern Mennonite High School as it sought to become independent from Eastern Mennonite College.

Dr. Myron Augsburger, President of EMC, needed a high school principal with financial and marketing skills. So he hired Sam Weaver to head the high school in 1969. To lead the high school, Sam needed training in education, and he enrolled in a Master's program at James Madison University. In the meantime, Weaver relied on dependable teachers already working at EMHS, like James Rush, David Mumaw,

Lois Janzen, Harvey Yoder, Marvin Miller, Ron Koppenhaver, Gloria Lehman, Esther Augsburger, Sam Strong, and Vivian Beachy. In 1977, Sam hired Ernest Martin to develop the academic program at the school. Knowing little about academics, Sam acknowledges that "Ernie saved my hide," by establishing increased trust and reputation in the community for curriculum at the high school.

In the fifteen-year process of creating an independent high school, Dorothy Shank



Sam Weaver and Dorothy Shank, May 2019.  
Photo by Andrea Wenger

ably chaired the EMHS Board, 1974-1981. In an era when few women served as leaders in the Mennonite church, Dorothy prayed about the decision, and then said she would help the school as the first woman chair of the Board. It was Dorothy, in an interview, who stated that we all stand on someone else's shoulders and that it is important to recognize God's faithfulness in launching a strong and independent EMHS in the 1970s.

Eastern Mennonite School began as a high school in 1917, but it soon added junior college classes. When the junior college grew into a four-year program and earned

accreditation in 1947, it created an identity problem for the high school. By the early 1960s, with enrollment growth in the college, visionaries in Virginia Mennonite Conference got busy and built a separate building for the high school in Park View, first used in 1964. Over Christmas break in 1963-1964, students and teachers picked up books from the college library and moved them to the new high school campus nearby on Parkwood Drive.

A few years after the high school moved into its new building, the EMC Board wanted the high school division to support itself, and according to the college's business office, EMHS was operating at a deficit. In 1967, according to EMC accounting methods, the high school deficit was over \$69,000. The Executive Committee of the EMC Trustees, which presided over the high school, asked the high school to balance its budget within five years. With Sam Weaver at the helm of the high school, the school reached a balanced budget by 1973. While Sam was the Principal, he gives credit to people like Daniel Bender, Dwight Wyse, Shirley J. Yoder, and Glendon Blosser for helping to set the financial ship of the school in good standing.

The years of Sam Weaver's leadership at EMHS, 1969-1981, were tumultuous years in the United States, with the Vietnam War, an era of rebellion and protest for youth, and rising inflation driven by rising oil prices. Still, students kept coming to EMHS, from as far away as Pigeon, Michigan, Sarasota, Florida, the Tidewater region of Virginia, and northeast Ohio. By 1977 the high school had 277 students, with a waiting list. Sam's Christian education philosophy relies on ownership of a student's education from the home, the church, and the Christian school. Students

tested Sam's leadership, to be sure, but the school grew in many ways and earned its charter in 1982.

Dorothy Shank remembers that during her tenure as Board Chair in the late 1970s she worried when good teachers left EMHS for other positions. She prayed God would send the school good replacement teachers. She especially worried when Marvin Miller, an outstanding music teacher, 1966-1981, left EMHS. "But," Dorothy rejoiced in the interview, "God brought in Jay Hartzler," another exceptional music teacher.

In a 2019 interview with Sam Weaver and Dorothy Shank, they noted the excellent support for the high school from Virginia Mennonite Conference churches in the 1970s. Sam visited Districts and churches and encouraged support. Consequently, churches in Virginia Conference stepped up and supported their high school, through a Congregational Aid Plan formulated by Glendon Blosser. Sam notes the way Conference Districts sent delegates to the Board meetings, like Robert Mast from Chesapeake, Va., and Ike Oberholtzer from Newport News. In return, the EMHS Touring Choir began a spring circuit of singing in many of the supporting churches, leading them in worship and song.

Programs and buildings seemed to spring up in the 1970s, attracting many students to attend. The school built a new fine arts addition in 1972, and while Dorothy Shank served as Board Chair, the school added a gymnasium, finished in 1976. In Park School, a former public school located next door to the high school that EMHS used as early as the 1960s, the high school set up an Industrial

Arts program and Art program. The college set aside rooms for high school students in Maplewood dorm, and to the present has not charged for the use of Lehman Auditorium for the annual high school graduation.

Dorothy Shank remembers that the tone of moving toward separation was tense at times, but by 1982 the two schools went different directions on amicable terms. And Sam Weaver, the balding principal who established the financial and church-based foundations for the school, decided it was time for him to move on. In 2019, an EMHS faculty member publicly recognized Sam at the annual National Honor Society Induction, when his granddaughter, Julie Weaver, joined the society. As Principal during the 1970s, Sam had signed all of the Honor Society documents.

It is not by our power, as Dorothy asserted, but by God's grace and faithfulness, that EMHS moved toward independence from the college in the 1970s. There had been those at the college who entertained ideas on what to do with the building should the program be discontinued. With good leadership, EMHS became a viable church school, a process that began in the 1960s and culminated with a charter in 1982.

## Sing Me High

The Sing Me High Music Festival celebrates music and faith in the Shenandoah Valley. Join festival hosts Brethren & Mennonite Heritage Center and the Walking Roots Band for the 4th annual Sing Me High Music Festival, August 23-24, 2019, to listen, sing, laugh, eat, and play — all while celebrating family, friends, and faith, whatever your tradition.

All events take place at the Brethren & Mennonite Heritage Center, located on Garbers Church Road. Of special interest to our readers may be the Harmonia Sacra singing, held Saturday, August 24, 2019, at 10 AM in the school house.

Last year at the Sing Me High festival, the Editor set up a vendor's table to sell his books. This year again, August 23-24, 2019, my eight books, a Gospel CD of Daphna Creek, and past issues of *Historian* will be available for sale at the Plowshares Publications table. Stop by my book display table and say hello!

**Music at the Harmonia Sacra singing, in the school house (former Cove Church), at Sing Me High, August 2018.**

Brethren & Mennonite Heritage Center, photo credit Jim Bishop.



## Mill Creek Church of the Brethren

Founded in 1840, the Mill Creek Church of the Brethren has a large facility and extensive cemetery in Port Republic, Rockingham County, about ten miles southeast of Harrisonburg. The Editor paid a brief visit to the church in May 2019, and took these photos.



## Virginia Mennonite Missions Centennial, 1919-2019

At the Zion Mennonite Church, Broadway, Va., October 17, 1919, Virginia Mennonite Conference ministers took action to establish a Mission Board. In 2019 Virginia Mennonite Missions celebrates 100 years of God's faithfulness in reaching out to the world through an organized mission agency.

A year ago, VMM asked the Editor to cull through the Conference Archives and find good photos to show 100 years of mission to the world. The VMC Archives has many photos, but only a few are adequately marked. For the researcher, photos without any identification are of very little use. If you want your photos to have longevity, mark names of those in the photo, where it was taken, and when. Future historians who find your photos well-marked will be grateful!

In the VMC Archives, located in the basement of the EMU Sadie Hartzler Library, the Editor found photos about the history of VMM. Adding others from his own collection, he assembled 250 photos about the history of Virginia Mennonite Missions.

You can see all 250 photos on the internet. The easiest way to access them is by finding the Shenandoah Mennonite Historian's site at <https://mennonitearchivesofvirginia.net/>, and clicking on the green link that takes you to the VMM Centennial Album.

Please mark November 9, 2019, 9:30 AM, on your calendar for Dr. Steven Nolt to speak at our annual Historian's meeting. He will speak about the VMM Centennial and the Eighteen Fundamentals, both adopted in the same Virginia Mennonite Conference meeting, October 17-18, 1919.



The Editor attended a high school graduation party at Mill Creek Church of the Brethren (pictured), Port Republic, Va., May 27, 2019. In the basement, the Editor noticed a history hall. These members were listed in the hall as the founders of the church in 1840: Isaac Long Sr., and his wife Barbara Ann Miller Long, John J. and Margaret Early Harshbarger, Daniel Yount, Samuel and Elizabeth Young Flory, Daniel and Margaret Saphley Miller, Joseph and Elizabeth Garber Miller, John Beckone Sr., and John Yount.

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

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

*Shenandoah Mennonite Historian* issues from 2001-2019 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.

Shenandoah Valley Mennonite Historians  
 780 Parkwood Drive  
 Harrisonburg, VA 22802