

Shenandoah Mennonite Historian

The Watchful Pilgrim.

A RELIGIOUS MONTHLY JOURNAL.

Take ye heed, watch and pray: for ye know not when the time is.
And What I say unto you I say unto you all, Watch. Mark. 13: 33, 37.

Vol. 1.—No. 1.

Dale Enterprise Va. AUGUST 1881.

Whole No 1

BE WATCHFUL.

the kings of the earth Unto him in the flesh until the time of his
that loved us, and washed us from second coming at the last day when
our sins in his own blood, And hath time shall be no longer. And more

Vol. 15, No. 1

Quarterly Publication of the Shenandoah Valley Mennonite Historians

Winter 2008

THE WATCHFUL PILGRIM and its publisher, Abraham Blosser.

August 1881 to July 1888

First of a series of articles on *The Watchful Pilgrim* and its producer and editor, Abraham Blosser.

Virtually unknown today among Shenandoah Valley Mennonites, except to a few buffs of local history, is this magazine that was published at Dale Enterprise by Blosser (1827-1891) the grandson of bishop Peter Burkholder, for nearly a decade. This journalistic venture was sometimes a monthly, sometimes a semi-monthly "Journal" as he called it. A generous portion of this issue will deal with him.

In looking at Blosser and the *Watchful Pilgrim* we get acquainted with a sometimes controversial, sometimes a bit puzzling writer and publisher who has too long been much ignored by Mennonite historians. We will take more than one issue to write all the pieces we need to include in order to understand this interesting character of 125 years ago, who appeared as

something of a meteorite that streaked across the Virginia Mennonite sky for two decades, if one may use that analogy.

Not only was this meteorite seen by Virginia Mennonites, some of whom found him a bit distressing and others who thought his ideas were great, but once he got going on publishing the *Watchful Pilgrim*, he found subscribers and sympathizers in a number of states which he names at one point.

However, for variety in this issue, we also republish Timothy Showalter's account in the *Youth's Christian Companion* of the small private Christian school his father ran for a few years.

And for a little entertainment we publish the interesting little tree someone put together regarding trivia details relating to the Bible.

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Introduction to Abraham Blosser

Long before he published and edited the *Watchful Pilgrim* from August 1881 until July 1888, Blosser had landed in the middle of a sharp controversy. Actually, one should say he was very much on one side! He and George Brunk were the leaders of the anti-Sunday school movement in Virginia that erupted in 1870-71.

The idea of a Sunday school came under discussion in the 1860's. Actually, the very first attempt at Sunday school has been unknown to historians. Bishop Jacob Hildebrand of Augusta County wrote in his 1861 diary¹ that in the summer of 1861 he began a Sunday school, presumably at the Hildebrand Church. However, for unknown reasons it seemed to have lasted only a few Sundays then it disappears from mention. He was ahead of his time!

However, in the 1860s, some families, among them the children of bishop Samuel Coffman attended neighborhood Sunday schools. John S. Coffman (Samuel's son) attended one and liked it. Father Coffman then began to talk about the need for Mennonites to begin Sunday schools, so their children don't need to attend those of other denominations. Some children had attended the New Erection (Presbyterian—now called Cooks Creek Church) Sunday school and some at the Methodist school at Trinity on Dry River, both in the Middle District. Eventually, when Sunday schools became a lively topic, a Mennonite family near Edom in the Northern District had begun to attend that Methodist Sunday school.

In 1867 Virginia Conference discussed the subject. Official minutes do not reveal that information but Deacon Frederick A. Rhodes kept a handwritten record of that September 1867 conference at Weavers Church and he writes as follows: "After dinner the subject of Sunday School tacon up and spoken again[st] by Gile [Northern District bishop John Geil] and no reply

then the Ministers spoke in rotation as usual some giving their vews on the subject of Sunday School undesided"²

So, it was officially undecided. At the next conference in April 1868 at Brennemans Church bishop Geil, who had opposed the idea, was described as coming up with the following: "Brother Gile spoke in faviouir of keeping Sunday school at home." Of course, that meant no general Sunday schools for Mennonite children!

Finally, in September 1969, at Trissels Church Deacon Rhodes tells us: [Samuel] Coffman laid before Conference the subject of Sunday School whether or not they should be held as a Meninite School or rejected and it was granted if the Church is agreed to it."

But the anti-Sunday school forces gathered themselves together. They charged that bishop Coffman had worked behind the scenes to get it passed. Apparently in 1870 and 71 the Bank church held summer Sunday school and in 1871-73 Weavers did the same. Brennemans Church held one in 1871. Then the anti-Sunday school people won the day for a decade.

The Anti-Sunday School Movement

In the Abraham Blosser Papers is found:

"A demand to our Ministering Brethren"
"According to our limited understanding the present Socalled Mennonite Sunday school here is unscriptural the way it is conducted and carried on. We therefore demand of our Ministers that they do show us direct Scriptural Authority Show us the passages by which Such Organizations are ordained or Commanded if they cannot do it we demand that these Sunday schools be laid aside as an unscriptural fashion of these latter days.

By a number of Mennonite Brethren"

²"Church Record," I-MS-5, Frederick A. Rhodes Collection, Virginia Mennonite Conference Archives. The poor spelling was retained as Rhodes has it.

¹Located in the Virginia Conference Archives at EMU.

In the same Blosser collection is a 32-page handwritten booklet entitled "Exposition on Sunday School Between John F. Funk Editor of the *Herald of Truth* of Elkhart Indiana And the Anti-Sunday School Mennonites of Virginia." It all appears to be in Blossers handwriting, even the letter from John F. Funk. The booklet generally summarizes the case against Sunday schools. In essay form it tends to largely repeat what is found in the next document.

Perhaps the best summary appears in another document in the same file, "Objections to the Mennonite Sunday School of Rockingham County Va." In it he numbers 25 points, all of them starting with "We object . . ."

Here they are in the briefest summaries the editor can manage:

1. It was introduced with one-sided representation and not by fair and honorable means.
2. It is not in accordance with the old order and creed of our church in allowing any member to teach publicly in our churches
3. Persons not members of our church are allowed to teach publicly in our churches
4. Women are allowed to teach publicly in our churches, a violation of I Cor. 14.34-5, I Tim. 11.12
5. It is in the style of the Sunday schools of the highest classes of our country
6. It has become a fashion amongst the proudest and dressiest classes of our country
7. By using it we follow after something that is in the highest repute by the world at large
8. It is represented as teaching the sacred scriptures to our youth with other selected books by Societies not opposed to war, bloodshed, suing, etc.
9. It gives our youth the reign because bishop Coffman said we cannot keep our youth from going to other Sunday schools. Who rules? Our youth?
10. Cultivates a spirit of exaltedness to give progressive scholars marks of honor
11. "Cunning means are made use of to absorb the opposite party"
12. It is something new
13. As soon as Weavers and Bank churches organized Sunday schools a host of other books were introduced
14. It is represented to our youth as a way better than that practiced by our forefathers

15. Our youths are shown to other societies as lights, whose way to heaven may be nearly as wide as the world

16. Sunday schools were instrumental in banishing the Bible from the weekday schools

17. Because other books than the "Sacred Scriptures" are used

18. Private council meetings of Sunday school teachers excluded regular members of our church

19. Because our bishop stated that the Sunday school should be under control of the church, but that is no more respected

20. People make the Sabbath their whole Christianity and neglect Christian duties during the week

21. Our Confession of Faith is not used while the question books of other Societies are

22. Curtails the attention to our regular meetings

23. May serve as a means to demoralize the more orderly Sunday schools of other Mennonite communities in the U. S.

24. From what we can learn there is no other Mennonite community in America that would allow such a Sunday school as this one in Rockingham

25. We think it is carried on in a way which in the course of time brings our church to a level with the highest and dressiest and warlike and worldly-minded churches of our country and the world at large.³

That's quite a list!

Despite the fears of Abraham Blosser and George Brunk, eventually the Sunday schools came to most Virginia Mennonites.

This George Brunk was the son of Christian Brunk who lived near Cootes store west of Broadway. Brunk (1831-1905) was ordained to the ministry several years after this in January 1874 at the age of 43. He died in Ohio in 1905.⁴

³"Abraham Blosser Papers," a file in I-MS-22, Significant Individual Collections, Box 1, Virginia Mennonite Archives.

⁴Harry A. Brunk, *History of Mennonites in Virginia*. Vol. 1. Harrisonburg: Pub. by author, 1959. On pages 199-227 Brunk helpfully summarizes and quotes above documents.

Now *THE WATCHFUL PILGRIM* Publication

A “religious” journal Blosser called it. Across the masthead for several years the masthead began with “Take ye heed, watch and pray: for ye know not when the time is.” from Mark 13. After four years he added to the masthead,

*“Thus saith the Lord, Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls.,
Jeremiah 6.16.*

The addition to the masthead in 1885 perhaps gave a better clue to what Blosser hoped to do with the publication. The first part of the masthead might imply that prophecy and the end times would be major focus. Not so. Little appears about different views of the end times. Those discussions came to the forefront some 60 years later when Virginia Mennonites and others labored over that lively topic.

So what did Blosser attempt to do. We’ll let him tell us directly. On August 1, 1885 he soliloquized: The magazine “started without a solitary subscriber. Though its circulation progressed slowly it still met some who were willing to allow it a place in their habitations.”

As he began volume five he claimed that it had found its way not only to Virginia homes, but was now going into West Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Tennessee, Indiana, Illinois, Missouri, Kansas,⁵ Texas, Manitoba, Oregon, Iowa, Michigan and Canada.” No small feat that would be, to find Mennonite subscribers in all those places willing to subscribe. Especially so, since

⁵Correct spelling seems to have been a problem periodically. When quoting, we spell it the way Blosser did.

the very successful *Herald of Truth*, published by John F. Funk from Elkhart, Indiana was now going into a large number of homes.

Abraham Blosser saw his paper championing the “cause of the Nonresistant Doctrine of Jesus Christ; which it strenuously vindicated; and opposing conformity to the world in its many forms, and opposition to popular unscriptural, innovations.”

And that was in a day, continued Blosser when many thought such a paper would only cause contention and strife, and that such papers ought to be crushed out of existence, and the more liberal upheld and supported.” Thus the *Watchful Pilgrim* was accused for sticking too close to the old paths, as Jeremiah said in the verse quoted in the masthead.

There was a nagging problem, though, in what he was trying to do—many who “hold to the old paths, are opposed to Religious papers,” that it was using worldly methods to cling to the old paths. “This we readily admit” confessed Blosser, but we now live in “most dangerous times, that the pilgrim traveling Zionward ever saw.” Why? Because Satan “now meets him everywhere not as a ‘Roaring Lion,’ as in former ages, but as an angel of light with the Bible in hand, crying ‘Holiness to the Lord.’”

With churches practicing open communion, aiming “to bring everything in equality with the Highest” and the “dressiest churches on earth conformed to the world by degrees.” Blosser thought it possible and necessary to “teach the reverse of the general drift of religious papers” and to show the evils “of the introduction of so many popular innovations, which if not opposed” would in time bring the “old order, on a level with the popular isms of the times.”

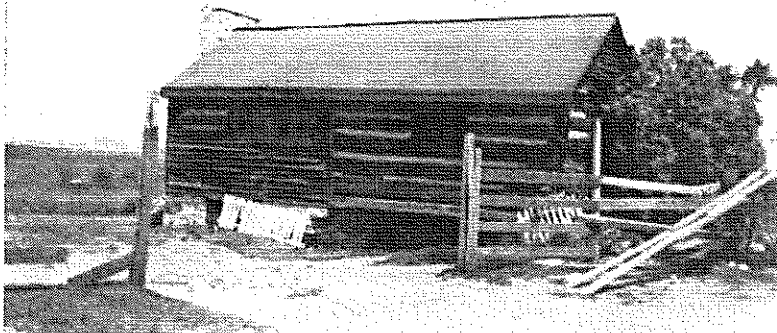
Is it possible that the *Watchful Pilgrim* was serving early notice of what happened a decade and a half later, when those who favored the old traditions were separated from Virginia Mennonite Conference to form what is today called the Old Order Mennonites? Possibly.

A scanning of the articles quickly gives one the impression that a good bit of his paper was

made up of essays he borrowed from non-Mennonites sources. Is there a bit of irony here? Only a decade earlier, he warned against Sunday schools using material from a “worldly” denomination. Now, with the publication of the *Watchful Pilgrim*, he often has articles that were not written by Mennonites!

Blosser often publicized Virginia Mennonite activities such as the semi-annual conferences and he periodically joyfully pointed out the progress of the building of another meetinghouse in Virginia or West Virginia. The building of the Zion church in 1885 (March, July issues) readily comes to mind, as does the building of the meeting house at Mouth of Seneca, West Virginia, Pendleton, Co., (Aug. 1, Oct. 1, 1885).

Also, very helpfully, beginning on January 1, 1885 he began the practice in each issue, of listing the meeting calendar of each regular Virginia and West Virginia preaching place. He was very supportive of the *Herald of Truth*, oftentimes lifting an article from that source.



Abraham Blosser Print Shop, Dale Enterprise, Va.

Discussing Both Sides Of An Issue

That’s what Blosser wanted. His solemn pledge was “that we will strive for God’s truth until death” even it means criticism. (April 1882, p. 186) If there’s a difference of views, “let us carefully and prayerfully consider the matter and hear each others views and not be too

read to condemn the views of others without good scriptural reasons.” (Nov. 1882, p. 57).

He further explained, “The *W. Pilgrim* is a free paper in a restricted sense only, that is free to serve as a medium to writers on religious matters and practical piety corresponding to the practices of the Mennonites only.” (Aug. 1882, 15).

A month later (p. 24) he was surprised so many people were saying “Stop discussion, you are tearing down the Church with it.” Then he used Menno Simons as a prime example in protesting against Roman Catholic practices. Menno said that if the gospel of Jesus Christ is our only guide, we don’t need to fear to bring to light our viewpoint and expose error as he did. Menno searched the scriptures, which is what we should do. We should test everything by that “most brilliant of lights, the gospel of Jesus Christ.” Hence, we invite “honest and sincere discussion of the Word of God on any subject not directly established or forbidden in the word of God.”

In October 1883 a J. L. W. wrote Blosser that his paper has the wrong name. “Strife and Disgrace” would be more proper! Then Blosser briefly explained that when choosing a name he felt a great desire “to be a truly ‘watchful pilgrim,’ a name which does not imply perfection, but implies one who is seeking the way leading to that which is perfect.” So, that’s why the name. Remember that Satan “is continually, with the Bible in hand, teaching the justification of war, fashionable array, open communion, certainty, Idolatry, and many other isms and organizations and practices, etc.” Thus we are not stirring up strife and contention, insisted Blosser.

So we have it from the editor and publisher what he was intending to do in producing this paper, something for which he apparently took a fair amount of grief and criticism during the life of the paper.

PART 1: More articles on the *Watchful Pilgrim* to come in the future.

History Of An Early Private School

By Timothy Showalter

[Before 20th century Christian Day schools and home schooling, here is a brief history of a very small private school, as published by the *Youth's Christian Companion* of Scottdale, PA, July 19, 1942. Article slightly condensed, Ed.]

This early enterprise I would hardly call a parochial school, nor was it a church school in the strictest sense of the word. It was neither under a church organization nor under church control. Rather to the contrary, it was not looked upon with favor by some in the church.

The little house about twelve by sixteen in size had its beginnings in the late nineties. My father, George B. Showalter, a man who was about forty years of age, and a parent of five boys and a girl, questioned the wisdom of those boys studying all the branches that were then taught in the public schools. Consequently he tried to have his children excused from the study of history.

His fears were that the study of history with its glorification of the heroes of war would attract his children to militarism; he, therefore, refused to permit his children to take history in public school. The outcome of the matter was: the authorities insisted on history, and he, being a man of strong convictions, refused to buy the histories. Consequently, about the middle of the winter of 1896-97, he removed his boys, four in number, from the public school.

The following fall the little schoolhouse was built, and his wife's sister, Margaret Blosser, was hired to teach. The house was not finished in time for the beginning of the three months' term held during the winter of 1897-98. The scholars that year consisted of five of his own children, three of Brother Joseph Geil's, and two boys of neighbor who lived on an adjoining farm.

We moved into our home-made schoolhouse, with its home-made benches, sometime early in the term from one of the rooms of our house, and felt that we had quite commodious quarters. We concentrated on reading, writing, spelling, geography, physiology, and arithmetic. History was out of the question, and grammar was not looked on with favor as my father did not seem to realize its place in an education at that time. A probable reason for this was that he seldom did any writing. Another reason: some of those who had an "education" in those days put on such an affected air that it did not make a good impression with our "Dutch folks."

The next winter, 1898-99, my father secured Sister Lizzie Shank, a young widow whose husband was a cousin of his, for our teacher. She taught us that winter for a two months' term, for the princely salary of ten dollars per month. A horse and buggy were also furnished to travel the two miles to and from her school. I must say that "Cousin Lizzie," as we called her, was a teacher all out of proportion to the salary she drew. A better teacher we never had.

This winter the same scholars attended as the year before, with the exception of two neighbor boys who did not return. Our teacher's oldest son and her daughter also attended. These same scholars and teachers composed the school the following winter, 1899-1900, with the addition of another little boy from an adjoining farm.

You may think that things were dry and monotonous in such a small school, but we all enjoyed our school and had some amusing things happen along the way to break the monotony. On one occasion, a pupil stumbling along with reading recitation read the sentence, "She drew a large rosy apple from the bottom of her pocket, split it in two, and gave the new pupil a half," as follows: ("She—drew—a—large—rosy—

apple—from—the—bot—tom—of—her—neck—and—smiled—it—in—two--," and so on.) We had the usual amount of play time, and enjoyed our games as well as any other school.

The following year the glory of the school began to wane. My father bought an adjoining farm and planned to move from the place, so the "schoolhouse" saw its last session of two months. This winter the second oldest boy, **the writer**, ascended to the heights of teacher, and had four scholars, his twin brothers, his sister, and a younger brother who was just starting into the mysteries of an education. The teacher was supposed to teach and further his own education.

The testimony of the scholars is that he was not such a grand success. It seems that he knew enough but the complaint was that he did not have the inclination to explain it patiently to others. However, I don't know if this testimony can be wholly relied upon, as all prophets are said to be without honor at home!

As to the teacher's furthering his own education, he only remembers well one lesson. That was along the line of physics, when he forcibly banged a small bag of clover seed that was stored in the room against the wall to see the effects of momentum. What he discovered was that there was another factor in physics, namely: there was not enough cohesion in the bag. Consequently the bag burst and the seed flew in every direction. This was a rather embarrassing moment, especially so, since the "Superintendent of Private Day School" could be expected to visit the school at any time convenient to him.

The schoolhouse was located along the path from the house to the barn, and there being no windows in those directions at that time, made these visits rather sudden and unexpected at times. Really, there was suspicion that he may have tarried in the vicinity of the school on occasions when he did not come in. Anyway, a teacher just past thirteen could hardly be expected to have the best of discretion.

The following winter father hired for a teacher, Brother A. H. Showalter, who was later a

deacon and minister in Augusta County. He was paid ten dollars per month for the two months' term, room and board, and the keeping of a horse. "Amos" as we called him was an extraordinarily good teacher in arithmetic. He taught some of his pupils, at least, to enjoy doing hard problems.

With this session this private school ended. From this time on the younger children again attended the public schools. The two oldest also attended public school for two months a year or so later. Father, however, used his influence to secure teachers of good character.

[The writer, Timothy Showalter, who taught a year at age thirteen, grew up to be an outstanding church leader, being chosen as a deacon, then a minister and finally a bishop in Northern District of Virginia Mennonite Conference. Ironically, though deprived of studying history for some five years, he enjoyed church history and wrote more Northern District history eventually, than anyone else in his era! – Editor]

NEWS! NEWS!

Annual Dinner and Meeting of the Valley Brethren-Mennonite Heritage Center – February 1, at 6:00 p.m. at the Park View Mennonite Church.

Cost: \$15, due by January 28, to Valley Brethren-Mennonite Heritage Center, P. O. Box 1563, Harrisonburg, VA 22803, or call 438-1275.

Speaker: Robert Alley, Chairman of the Board. He promises to "really celebrate the witness of the Heritage Center." A video will be shown of last year's experiences of the Center.

Have you renewed your subscription for 2008? \$6 per individual, \$10 per couple. Send to Jim Rush, 780 Parkwood Drive, Harrisonburg, VA 22802.

The Tree of Knowledge

THE
Bible con-
tains 3,566,480
letters, 810,697
words, 31,175 ver-
ses, 1,189 chapters,
and 66 books. The
longest chapter is the
119th Psalm; the shortest
and middle chapter the 117th
Psalm. The middle verse is
the 8th of the 118th Psalm. The
longest name is in the 8th chapter
of Isaiah. The word "and" occurs
46,627 times; the word "Lord" 1,855
times. The 27th chapter of Isaiah and the
10th chapter of 2d book of Kings are alike.
The longest verse is the 9th of the 8th chapter
of Esther; the shortest verse is the 35th of the
11th chapter of John's Gospel. In the 21st verse
of the 7th chapter of Ezra is the alphabet except j.
The finest piece of reading is the 20th
chapter of Acts. The name of God
is not mentioned
in the
book
of Esther. It
CONTAINS KNOWLEDGE,
WISDOM, HOLINESS AND LOVE.

Biblical trivia, King James Version, adapted from a printed and pasted item inside the front cover of the Joseph W. Coffman (son of Bishop Samuel Coffman) and Sarah Heatwole Family Bible, contributed by H. Amos Coffman on November 26, 1985, to Virginia Mennonite Conference Archives. Of course, the editor did not double-check all the above details (except I did check Ezra 7:21). Imagine the intensity of work to check the above numbers to see if all are precisely accurate!

jol

Shenandoah Mennonite Historian

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Photo, p. 5 – from Harry A. Brunk, *History of Mennonites in Virginia*, Vol. 1, p. 354

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