



# Shenandoah Mennonite Historian

Spring 1999

Volume 6, Number 2 Quarterly publication of the Shenandoah Valley Mennonite Historians

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## Mennonites and Brethren Work Together on Cultural Center

Committees are being formed and legal documents drawn up as the planners get serious about what is now being called the Valley Brethren-Mennonite Cultural Center. It will be built on donated land at the corner of Mt. Clinton Pike and Acorn Drive in north Harrisonburg.

In February a board of directors was formed, with equal representation from the Mennonite and Brethren Churches. Calvin Redekop, a retired college professor who is vice-president of the Shenandoah Valley Mennonite Historians, was asked to chair the board. Four committees were appointed: Site & Facility Development, Fundraising & Finance, Program, Publicity.

In January, volunteers worked hurriedly to dismantle and move an historic house donated to the cultural center by two Brethren families—Fred and Doris Showalter and Bob Martin. Seven generations of Mennonites lived in the two-story house, which was built with logs and eventually covered up with siding. The house, located near Weavers Church west of Harrisonburg, was about to be torn down to make room for a new elementary school. Leading the dismantling efforts were Al Keim and Jim Herr.

One of the first acts of the Cultural Center's new board was to adopt a purpose statement:

*The Valley Brethren-Mennonite Cultural Center will provide a special place to tell the common story of the Brethren and Mennonites in the valley, do research on*

*their denominational histories, review (recover and display) artifacts from each heritage, reflect on core faith-values, and celebrate our responses to the cultural and historical events of our past and present.*

Local Mennonites and Brethren will soon be solicited for their ideas, their volunteer help, their artifacts, and their money.

-Steve Shenk, president  
Shenandoah Valley Mennonite Historians

## The Life of L.J. Heatwole By Grace Suter Grove (Part II)

In 1890, the L.J. Heatwole family moved to Garden City, Missouri. There he was called to serve as bishop over the district composed of the Garden City, Missouri, Olathe and Harper, Kansas, congregations. At the end of three years, because of chronic illnesses, the family decided to move back to Virginia. Although L.J. felt that his place of service in the church was in the Midwest, he could not ignore the health of his family. Also, the remembrance of his personal encounter with a tornado made L.J. consider the wisdom of returning to the sheltering hills of the Shenandoah Valley.

At the time L.J. moved back to Virginia, Bishop Samuel Coffman was looking for an assistant. Since L.J. was already ordained as bishop Coffman requested that he be recognized. The Virginia Conference granted this request, but a few of the Central District members objected to L.J. being used

because he had not been ordained by lot. From then on the dissatisfaction grew, especially after Samuel Coffman's death.

L.J. was unaware of the depth of the hostility toward him until after his sermon at the December 10, 1895, meeting which was called for choosing candidates for a minister. In his sermon for the occasion, L.J. spoke on what disqualified a candidate as well as the qualifications, which included his conviction that the use of tobacco was not appropriate for a minister of the gospel. Then he concluded with this comment:

“When you come into the council to name a brother for minister, be sure you have the brightest star within the boundaries of the Middle District. Don't come in and say you think this or that one will be the most suitable, but be sure you know it, and that your conviction comes from the profoundest depth of you soul, otherwise your vote might be rejected as being carelessly given.”

Reaction to L.J.'s sermon was mixed. One person declared: “That is what we should have had twenty years ago.” But L.J.'s comment that the use of tobacco disqualified one for the ministry offended the older members of the council, and L.J. was stunned when he learned the extent of the dissatisfaction with his leadership.

Because of the unfavorable response, the ordination was postponed. Those who were displeased with L.J.'s leadership accused him of favoring younger, educated men for the ministry and promoting Sunday schools and evangelistic meetings. They also felt that he did not follow the old paths which were based on the Word of God.

Later, when an ordination was held, Isaac B. Wenger was one of those chosen. He was well educated and an excellent speaker, but he became ill and died a few months after being ordained, having preached only one sermon. L.J. grieved at the loss of so talented a minister, but the opposition looked on this as a judgment from God.

For five years L.J. sought to resolve the conflict. He asked forgiveness for and retracted the statements in his sermon that had offended, but just when he

thought that peace had been established the controversy again arose. Bishops outside the district did not want to become involved, and L.J. was often forced to stand alone. Being human, he made some decisions which in retrospect were not wise. During this time he received encouraging letters from his brother-in-law, John S. Coffman who had similar experiences.

Finally a committee composed of ministers from Pennsylvania and Ohio was asked to help solve the problems, but in the end this too failed. In May of 1901, the dissatisfied ones chose not to be identified with the Middle District and the Virginia Conference and established their own congregation.

With the church trouble finally settled, L.J. was free to pursue his favorite pastime—writing. Following is a listing of the books and manuscripts he authored.

Heatwole Moral Standard Readers—in manuscript form.

Moral Training in the Public Schools—published in 1906.

Key to the Almanac and Sideral Heavens—published in 1908.

The Perpetual Calendar—manuscript published in 1912.

He also compiled the Mennonite Handbook of Information, at the request of the Mennonite General Conference which was published in 1925.

Lifetime highlights came for L.J. when on May 28, 1913, he received the Bachelor of Philosophy degree and on May 28, 1914, the Master of Arts from the correspondence department of Oskaloosa College. He comments:

“When I was a young man I had made my plans to complete a college course, but with the coming of the ministry all these plans were canceled.

“I am telling my folks that the Lord has opened the way for me to have what I denied myself when young, at an age when I may be more able to bear it in a humble way than I could have done then. The credit without the honor is all I have been seeking in the matter.”

Thus at 62, L.J. reached the goal of which he had dreamed when at the age of 18 he made the choice to become a teacher.

Of all his activity, L.J. made the welfare of the church his first priority. Members who were unable to attend regular services received letters of encouragement. No call for spiritual help was turned down, however inconvenient.

Late one evening the request came for L.J. to come and baptize a young woman who was ill. The home was located in the foothills of the Shenandoah Mountain, and friends strongly advised him to wait for the morning as the way was far too dangerous to travel alone at night. But L.J. felt the urgency of the call, and he reached the woman's bedside at 11 o'clock, performed the rite of baptism, and at 12 midnight the woman died. He stayed awhile to comfort the family and returned home.

Another area of concern to L.J. was the number of young people from Mennonite families who were being lost to the Church because they had to go to secular schools for their advanced training. He felt it was imperative that the church establish a school where Christian education would be available.

A committee was formed and L.J. was asked to serve as a principal of the proposed school, but he refused because he did not have a formal degree. However, he did consent to help with the administration for the first term held at Harrisonburg, Virginia, in the fall of 1917, and was faithful in his support of the Eastern Mennonite School, serving as President of the Board until 1923.

The final test came for L.J. when he was indicted for advising members of the Church not to buy stamps to support the military in World War I. Although his lawyer sought to have the charge dismissed L.J. was convicted of treason. It was very difficult for him to plead guilty to such a charge, but it was either that or be subject to a \$100,000.00 fine or prison, or both. In the end, the lawyer was able to secure his release by having L.J. plead guilty as charged and paying a \$1,000.00 fine.

The church rallied to his support, and one of the solicitors said that it was the easiest 1,000 dollars he had ever raised.

Over the years L.J. had faithfully kept a record of all the church activities. This preserved a wealth of historical material for the Mennonite Church.

As he approached the fourscore year, L.J. felt it was time to transfer all responsibility to younger men. He prepared a farewell sermon which he delivered at Weavers Church in the regular morning service on March 11, 1928. In this farewell he reviewed the activities of the 41 years of his ministry, and concluded with these remarks:

"Like some great railroad system or steamship line there is always the place marked "The End of the Route," and I am made to feel that the stopping place in that route is not far off.

"With the close of this meeting I will allow the mantle and cloak of service to fall on younger shoulders. To Brother S.H. Rhodes, I yield all the duties that were heretofore mine, with all the honor and esteem from the Church that may pertain to that office. My benediction and blessing goes out to his co-workers who are admonished to stand by him and hold up his hands.

"To him, to them, and you all as members, I bid a sincere and affectionate leave-taking farewell."

L.J. had keenly felt the loss of Mary, his wife, after her death on February 18, 1926. However, the demands of the ministry and his writing helped to ease his loneliness. But now he was faced with failing eyesight and declining health, although his spirit remained strong.

After a series of strokes, closure came on December 26, 1932, when death was "swallowed up in victory."

Funeral services were held from Weavers Mennonite Church December 28 with Bishop S.H. Rhodes and Rev. H.B. Keener officiating. Burial was in the Weavers Church cemetery.

Tributes to L.J. and appreciation for his life were published in newspapers and church periodicals. From the Gospel Herald we have this excerpt:

“The loss sustained by the church from the passing of L.J. Heatwole is keenly felt by many, yet in the influence of his life we have a rich heritage which we greatly cherish. Seldom has it been the lot of any one individual to touch the life of the people through so many different avenues.”

Two excerpts from the pen of L.J. himself perhaps reveal more truly the person he was than all the accolades from both the religious and the secular community. He wrote:

“The disposition with which we have to look always upon the sunny side of life and make our lives agreeable to those around us is one of the most essential forms of godliness. For the true child of God always carries around with him a heart and mind filled with the element of gladness that shows the soul is simply resting with Jesus. That quiet, profound, and peaceful state of mind that leaves the countenance, hid as it were, in a halo of smiles and sunshine.”

“Whatever design, whatever purpose or intention the Lord has originally had in view in bringing us into being and placing us here on the stage of action, is fully accomplished in us only when we are willing to trust every issue of life to the guidance of his unseen hand.”

-from the Mary E. Suter manuscript on the life and work of L.J. Heatwole.

### Book Review

Samuel E. Horst, editor The Fire of Liberty in their Hearts: The Diary of Jacob E. Yoder of the Freedman's Bureau School, Lynchburg, Virginia. (Richmond, Va: The Library of Virginia, 1996) 192 p.

In March 1866, almost a year after Lee surrendered at Appomatox, Jacob Eshbach Yoder, a twenty-eight year old school teacher from Montgomery County, Pennsylvania headed south to Lynchburg, Virginia to teach in a freedmen's school. Yoder went at the urging

of his mentor, James P. Wickersham, a professor at Millersville Normal School. Wickersham believed education was necessary if the newly freed blacks were ever to take their rightful place in the body politic. He passed on his vision to many of his students including Jacob Yoder.

Soon after Yoder's arrival in Lynchburg, Yoder began keeping a diary. It is this diary, recording events from April 28, 1866 to February 17, 1867, and a second diary of November 15, 1869 to November 14, 1870, which Samuel Horst has edited, providing an introduction/biography of Yoder, as well as through annotations of the persons, places, events referred to in the Yoder diaries.

One is struck by the initial idealism by which Yoder approached his task. Like Wickersham, Yoder believed that for the blacks, “education was their only passport to distinction.” However, as Yoder confronted the realities of the task, he loses some of his idealism. By the end of the 1870s, he wonders if the freedmen are too ignorant for free schools. This and other speculations like his wondering if the black “thicker skulls” hinder their ability to learn, demonstrate that even those who championed black enfranchisement in the south's social, economic, and political systems were not free from the common racist assumptions that permeated American society at that time. Still as Horst's biography of Yoder shows, he did retain enough idealism to stay in Lynchburg and to spend the rest of his life as a teacher and administrator in the city's black public schools.

Yoder's diaries are also interesting for the light they shed on American evangelical religion. While Yoder was raised in a Mennonite home, he never joined his parent's church. In fact several entries in the diary indicate that there was some tension in the relationship between Yoder and his Mennonite mother. While Yoder showed a marked proclivity for “Methodistic” Christianity, he was truly ecumenical in his church attendance. However, his Mennonite upbringing may have influenced his sentiment against infant baptism, which comes from discussions he had with a Frank Stauffer. This might also partly explain why Yoder later joined the Baptists rather than the Methodists. However, consideration must also be given to the fact that his wife Anna was Baptist.

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Yoder's diaries are the stuff on which the broader interpretative works on the reconstruction are built. In his able editing Horst has made the diaries available to other scholars in a reliable form. At the same time Horst's introduction describes not only Yoder's own life but also the whole freedmen's education experiment in Lynchburg. As such it provides one more case study to compare with other similar experiences elsewhere.

However, The Fire of Liberty in Their Hearts is not just for scholars. Yoder was an articulate person and a keen observer, and he kept an interesting diary, whose human interest will capture the attention of many readers. At the same time, those of us who make a Christian profession can find in Yoder's struggles an echo of our own frailty and need for a divine Helper. In that sense they are a witness to something even greater than their own time and place.

-Edsel Burdge, Jr.,  
Shippensburg, Pa.

### **From Stringtown to Park View**

Prior to the 1920's the Harrisonburg suburb of Park View was known as Stringtown. A row of houses was located along the former Mt. Clinton Pike (now Chicago Avenue) from the tollgate (now at the juncture of Park Road) toward Harrisonburg.

The surrounding area was farm land belonging to the Steele family. This tract was purchased by the Steeles about 1888 from a Mr. Harrison for \$66 per acre.

Before the roads were taken over by the state in 1918, toll money was collected for building and maintaining the roads. The toll was reported to be ten cents for a horse and buggy, five cents per head of cattle. The Stringtown Tollgate was once operated by Mrs. Fred Ours. Toll money collected here was once used also to help build the Rawley Springs Turnpike (now Rt. 33 West.)

Another landmark was the Shands House just across the hill west of Stringtown (now Gemeinschaft Home.) This farm was purchased by E.A. Shands

before the Civil War. During the war Captain Shands was killed near the Shenandoah River. His sons Elverton and William later practiced law in Harrisonburg and were prominent figures in the social life of the community.

Older residents of Park View remember "Two Penny George," the elderly black servant of Mr. Elverton Shands. Every morning and evening George would walk out from Harrisonburg (where Mr. Shands lived in his later days) carrying a milk pail to milk the cow on the farm. George would beg for two pennies but wouldn't accept a nickel because "a nickel's too heavy." Young boys frequently taunted George by offering him a nickel or telling him that a black hearse was coming down the road. He was deathly afraid of the latter.

The most historic landmark in our village was Assembly Park and Hotel (on the site of the Woodland Home.) A race track was laid out in the field west of the woods (now occupied by the EMU dorms and soccer field). Horse races were held here; it was reportedly used also for bicycle races around 1900.

A large three-story resort hotel and an open-air tabernacle were the chief facilities at Assembly Park. The first agricultural fair in the county was held there in 1892. Traveling evangelists Dr. T. DeWitt Talmadge, Billy Sunday and Sam Jones spoke to large audiences at Assembly Park. An estimated 25,000 persons attended the Dunkard (Church of the Brethren) conference in the park in June 1909.

Assembly Park's 23 acres were purchased in 1917 by the founding fathers of Eastern Mennonite School for \$14,500. The old resort hotel, by then referred to as "The White House," became the first location of the school, with classes opening on October 19, 1917. Traditionally, the school's commencement activities were held in the tabernacle (located near the present Park Wood Cabin.) The weight of a 10-inch wet snow in the spring of 1932 demolished the structure. In 1941 the Old Park Building was torn down because of its potential fire hazard.

With the coming of the college to the village in 1917, Mennonites began to move here. Smith Avenue, leading to EMC's new location on the hill in 1919, and College Avenue (south) were the first streets laid

off. Stringtown soon became locally known as Mennonite-town. Later in the 1920's a group of residents met on Daniel A. Blosser's front porch (corner of College and Mt. Clinton) to discuss renaming the suburb. The Mennonites were rather strong for the name Sharon. The non-Mennonites pulled for a name without religious or Mennonite connotations. Park View turned out to be a compromise which suited the majority of the voters in the village.

-Harold D. Lehman

#### Sources:

Harry A. Brunk, History of Mennonites in Virginia, 1900-1960.

Nancy B. Hess, The Heartland.

Hubert R. Pellman, Eastern Mennonite College, 1917-1967.

"Here in Virginia we look forward to the past."

- a U.Va history professor

"I am often struck how unimportant the things th historians make so much of seem to have been to ordinary people at the time."

C.S. Lewis, Letters to an American Lady

"History is inevitably viewed from a particular point of view or perspective."

- Howard Grimes, The Christian Views History

#### Membership:

To become a member of Shenandoah Valley Mennonite Historians and to receive future copies of this newsletter, send name and address and 1999 dues (\$10 per couple, \$6 per single) to:

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