



Bethel  
College

North Newton, Kansas

Newsletter of the Mennonite Library and Archives  
Mennonite Church USA Archives—North Newton  
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# Gleanings

from the  
Threshing Floor

October 2004, No. 6

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## STAFF

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The archives and library staff continues to include:

- John D. Thiesen, archivist and co-director of libraries for Bethel College;
- Barbara Thiesen, librarian and co-director of libraries for Bethel College;
- James R. Lynch, assistant archivist;
- Rosemary Moyer, photograph archivist (volunteer);
- Esther Rinner, Esther Thieszen, Stan Voth, Mary Rempel volunteers.

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## SCHEDULE OF MENNONITE STUDIES EVENTS

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Oct. 31-Nov. 2, 2004: Menno Simons Lectures: Lee Palmer Wandel from the University of Wisconsin, Madison, "Faith and Humanity: How Do We Tell the Story of the Reformation?"

Nov. 12, 2004: Staley Lecture: Ted and Lee, Mennonite comedic duo act

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## FORMER GENERAL CONFERENCE ARCHIVES

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In December 2003 the MC USA Historical Committee received a grant from the Schowalter Foundation to process the pre-1970 records of the former General Conference Mennonite Church.

In processing, basic preservation tasks are done, such as transferring files to acid-free folders, and removing metal paper clips and rubber bands. Files are organized if they were not in a useful order when they came to the archives. Finally, a finding aid is compiled, which includes a folder by folder listing of the files that were processed.

Pre-1970 records are the focus because the General Conference went through a major reorganization in 1968-1970, so records generated after the reorganization come from a different set of committees, boards and commissions than those before. The post-1970 structures lasted with few changes up to the MC USA merger. General Conference records from the last years of its existence are still coming in to the archives, but we think that all pre-1970 records have been transferred. Although some groups of post-1970 records have been processed, completing the post-1970 records is a future project.

Bethel student Ida Shoemaker has been doing the basic preservation work and computer entry since March 2004. We expect to complete the project in fall, and the completed finding aids will be posted on our web site.

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## MENNONITES AUCTIONED ON EBAY

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The subject line of an email message to me from Keith Sprunger (retired Bethel history professor) on Dec. 18, 2003, was "Interesting item on eBay." I'm not a regular follower of eBay, although I have bought and sold some items on the auction site, but Keith regularly watches several categories of auctions for items of local and Mennonite historical interest.

In this case, William Draper of Moon Dancers Antiques in Gill, Massachusetts, was offering a handwritten book of minutes of the "Defenseless Mennonite Church" (today the Evangelical Mennonite Church based in Ft. Wayne, Indiana), containing minutes from 1883 to 1923. Draper reported that he had purchased the book at an auction in Vermont, but the story of the book's travels from 1923 to 2003 is unknown. No other version of the "Defenseless" group's minutes, published or unpublished, seems to be available anymore, so this record book provides previously unavailable documentation.

Keith Sprunger's email started off several days of auction suspense. I went ahead and put in a bid of \$20 immediately, but that didn't meet the reserve price (the minimum bid for which the owner was willing to sell). I wasn't sure how seriously to take the sale, since I was not familiar with what information was already available on the Defenseless group; as far as I knew at that time, the record book might be a duplicate and not of great interest. Later in the day on the 18th, I got an email from Sam Steiner, librarian at Conrad Grebel University College in Ontario. He is also apparently a follower of eBay and became aware of the record book's sale. He seemed to view the record book as significant. I had upped my bid to \$50 but that still didn't meet the reserve price.

On the 19th, Sam Steiner said he had bid \$78, which also didn't meet the reserve. At this point, Sam dropped out of the bidding in favor of having the book purchased by a US Mennonite archives. On the 20th, I increased my maximum bid to \$300, but I was soon outbid again. The only person now bidding against me was someone who used the email name "global-ali." I sent him an email message via eBay's system by which

eBay participants can contact each other about eBay business. This was on the 22nd; by this time the current price was \$338.33 and my maximum bid was \$400. Later that day, globalali outbid me again for \$405. On the 23rd, he replied to me, asking more about my Mennonite archives connections. He said "I'm very much interested in the Mennonite Church and its history. . . . I may just give this up to you." His name appeared to be Ali Hussein. I responded to his message with more details about the archives, but that was the last I heard from him. He didn't give up on the bidding. In eBay, I was able to check on his previous purchases from eBay; he had been buying in two categories: Mennonite-related items (like old Eastern Mennonite College yearbooks) and medical-related numismatic items (like medals commemorating doctors or hospitals). None of his recent purchases had been over \$100, so his bidding on the Defenseless Mennonite record book was unusual. I never did find out more about him.

On the 23rd, Sam Steiner, who had been watching the bidding, recommended I use an auction sniping service. This is a service whereby one can put in a maximum bid and have the bid automatically made to eBay in the last few minutes or seconds of an auction, thereby hiding one's interest in an item from other bidders. I signed up for a trial period at esnipe.com. Sam also reported that he had contacted the Evangelical Mennonite Church in Ft. Wayne to see if anyone there had interest in the book. Don Roth, a past president of the denomination, responded to this query and began following the auction. He was a newcomer to eBay and put in a bid of \$450. I informed Ali Hussein that the new bidder was, in effect, a representative of the legitimate owner of the book, but got no response.

Don Roth also got in contact with Steve Estes in Chenoa, Illinois. Steve has done extensive research on the history of Mennonites in the Midwest, where the EMC congregations are concentrated. On the 24th Steve called me to talk about the auction and the record book. He was very eager to recover the book and informed me that the minutes it contained were not available elsewhere; it was a unique document. The auction was scheduled to end at 5:37pm on the 24th. Steve ended up communicating between Don Roth and me several times on the 24th. We decided that I would continue bidding on the book, but that Roth would provide the funding and the book would go to him to be turned over to the EMC denomination. So then I put in a maximum bid of \$1000 via eSnipe. Steve and I had several more phone calls during the day on the 24th, as we got more nervous about actually winning the bid. I upped the maximum in eSnipe first to \$1500, then \$5000 and finally \$10,000, just to make sure. eSnipe was set to put through my bid 6 seconds before the end of the auction. Ali Hussein had pushed the actual price up above \$550.

We had a Christmas Eve dinner scheduled at my parents-in-law that evening, so the rest of the family went, while I sat at the computer at home to watch the end of the auction. A few minutes before the end of the auction, I put in a direct bid through eBay of \$2000, just in case the eSnipe setup didn't work. I expected Ali Hussein to jump in again at the last minute but he didn't. We won the record book for \$585.75.

The book arrived on Dec. 29. In January, I scanned the pages and made a CD copy for the MLA and for Steve Estes, and then sent the book on to Don Roth in Ft. Wayne. The international network of electronic interaction produces some very strange coincidences: a Midwestern Mennonite record book mys-

teriously appears in Vermont, desired by the mysterious Ali Hussein, and "rescued" by Mennonite historians and archivists.

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### ANOTHER EBAY STORY

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On February 29, 2004, a seller in Vancouver, British Columbia, offered for auction a copy of *Gesang-Buch in welchem eine Sammlung geistreicher Lieder befindlich; zur allgemeinen Erbauung und zum Lobe Gottes herausgegeben* (Odessa: P. Franzow, 1867). They said the book was dated 1869, but I suspect it was 1867 because there doesn't seem to have been an 1869 edition.

This Russian Mennonite hymn book was supposed to have been the property of Arthur Hayes and his wife Florence. Hayes, according to the seller's information, was a grounds keeper for Queen Victoria. The seller seemed to believe that the Hayes family was Russian Mennonite. Many of the other items offered for auction by the same seller were antique cameras.

The starting bid was \$225, but the seller also offered a "buy-it-now" price of \$18,500!!! He also said "serious offers over \$10,000 will be considered." After a 10 day auction, there was only one bid, for \$225, from a buyer in Germany who had bought other Mennonite books in the past.

What was Queen Victoria's grounds keeper doing with a Russian Mennonite hymnal? Or is this story a hodgepodge of complete errors? We may never know.

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### VISTULA MENNONITE STUDIES PROJECT

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The story of Mennonites in the Vistula Delta (what is now northern Poland) is one of the less thoroughly studied chapters of Mennonite history, especially in English. This is despite the fact that it is the fountainhead of the Russian Mennonite experience, which features so prominently in North American Mennonite experience. The history of Mennonites along the Vistula river in eastern Europe deserves more intensive cultivation.

John Thiesen, archivist, and Mark Jantzen, assistant professor of history at Bethel, have begun a "Vistula Mennonite Studies Project," focusing on the collection of archival material, and the translation and publication of historical texts about the Vistula Mennonites.

The publication aspect of the project has gotten off to a good start. We have a draft translation of H. G. Mannhardt's *Die Danziger Mennonitengemeinde* [The Danzig Mennonite Congregation] (1919), a history of one of the leading congregations. We hope to publish the translation as part of the C. H. Wedel series sometime in the next year. We also have a draft translation of Wilhelm Mannhardt's *Die Wehrfreiheit der alt preussischen Mennoniten* [The Military Exemption of the Prussian Mennonites] (1863). This is the central historical work on the Vistula Mennonite story. This translation will also be published after the Danzig translation is completed.

Donations toward this project to help with publication costs and future archival collecting are always welcome.



How did the symbol of the U. S. flag appear to Mennonites before the 20th century? How would they have viewed this symbol when World War I and II, Korea, Vietnam, the Cold War and Iraq were all in the unknown future?

The original of the document quoted below is found in the David Goerz papers (MLA.MS.27, folder 16, box 2). It is undated and is apparently a brief acceptance speech given by David Goerz upon receipt of a U. S. flag for Bethel College, probably the one seen in the above photo. Goerz was one of the founders of Bethel College and its business manager for many years. The date of this event did not get recorded. The fact that the text refers to the completion of the college building as being in the future would lead one to think that it must be in 1892 or 1893 when construction was actively underway. But the references to church closures in Russia, which seem to be from 1896, would make the flag presentation date to maybe 1896 or 1897 or even later.

The Ladies of the Bell Club were apparently local Newton supporters of the college project (not necessarily Mennonites) who had planned to raise money for a bell for the bell tower that was part of the original plan in what is now the Bethel Administration Building. When the bell tower and 4th floor were dropped from the plan to save on construction costs, the ladies apparently lowered their sights also to providing a flag for the building.<sup>1</sup> The back of one of the document's pages has pencilled in "Mrs. H. Johnson, 227 Elm Str, Newton" and "Mrs. O. B. Hildreth." These might have been two of the ladies of the Bell Club.

(For a more extensive visual commentary on Mennonites and flags, see the online photo exhibit at <http://www.bethelks.edu/services/mla/numbered-photos/pholist1.php?list=flags.txt>)

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Ladies of the Bethel College Bell Club!

It is with a sense of profound gratitude and true appreciation that I accept from you this very appropriate and welcome gift for Bethel College.

Permit me however to make a few remarks in regard to the flag. In the first place I wish to say, that I look upon ["accept" is crossed out here] this flag as an emblem of liberty and freedom, of national unity and independence, and of good will toward all loyal citizens of the U. S. rather than as a battle flag; and in order to better illustrate my appreciation of the privilege of living under the protection of the Stars & Stripes let me relate a singular incident which not long ago happened in Russia.

In one of our Settlements in the southern part of our old Fatherland it was found necessary to build a new church. A large church building was erected, but when our people were ready to dedicate the church, they could not obtain from Government the permission to do so, and up to this day that church building stands there with locked doors. It may be used for a cattle barn or any other purpose but not for a place of worship. And above all the Russian Gov. did not even give a single reason for withholding permission to dedicate the church.<sup>2</sup>

Now just imagine, how we would feel, if we were not allowed to dedicate Bethel College after the building is completed and the day set for the dedication.

But thank God, that such things can only happen in Russia but never in our country of the free, and Bethel College will never be closed by such arbitrary rulings of a despotic government, as long as we are protected by the star-spangled banner. And therefore again, Ladies I thank you.

D Goerz

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<sup>1</sup>Peter J. Wedel, *The Story of Bethel College* (North Newton, KS: Bethel College, 1954), 87-88. The document is quoted here. Wedel refers to it as a "letter," which is probably not correct.

<sup>2</sup>Goerz may be thinking in this paragraph of the closure of two Mennonite church buildings in the Zagradovka colony in the Russian Empire in early 1896. Peter M. Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia (1789-1910)* (Fresno, CA: Board of Christian Literature, General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1978), 547-550. Thanks to James Urry for pointing me to this reference.

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## MENNONITES AND FLIGHT

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The recent Wright Brothers centennial (Dec. 2003) prompted me to wonder: who was the first Mennonite to fly in a plane, or who was the first Mennonite pilot, or were there any early Mennonite plane builders? I can't provide any definitive answers to these questions, but below is a list of the fragmentary information that I was able to gather. My cut-off date for "early" Mennonite aviation is more or less 1930.

• Probably the earliest story is the "HUP Project," named after its three participants, Kornelius Hildebrand, Peter Unrau, and Henry Plenert, in the Chortitza Colony of Russia in 1909. The three young men built a powered plane that had a brief flight before being brought down by equipment failure.<sup>3</sup>

• In 1917, reportedly, an Isaac B. Plett of Steinbach, Manitoba, built a helicopter, powered by a Model T Ford engine, which failed to fly.<sup>4</sup>

• Alvin Waltner of Freeman, South Dakota, bought a Lincoln-Paige plane in 1927 and hired a pilot to teach him to fly during three weeks of barnstorming in the southern states. The plane hung from the ceiling of the Kauffman Museum at Bethel for many years and was returned to Freeman in the 1980s.<sup>5</sup>

• Another Steinbach resident, Frank W. Sawatzky, took pilot-training in 1930, built his own plane called the “Pietenpol,” and flew it in an airshow at Steinbach in July 1932.<sup>6</sup>

These are just a few tidbits. There must be more out in the collective memory waiting to be uncovered. And the broader topic of Mennonites and technology is an undeveloped one.

<sup>3</sup>Peter Lorenz Neufeld, “Mennonite Aviation Pioneers: The HUP Project at Chortitza,” *Mennonite Historian* 17:1 (March 1991), 1-2.

<sup>4</sup>Ralph Friesen, “President’s Report,” *Preservings* 22 (June 2003), 62.

<sup>5</sup>Letter from Alvin Waltner to Charles Kauffman, 17 December 1944, from the Kauffman Museum files.

<sup>6</sup>Friesen, 62.

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### THIERSTEIN ARRESTED!

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At the Harvey County Historical Society in Newton, Kansas, the archives contains a large bound volume titled “Jail Record 1933-1951.” An entry for Dec. 7, 1936, page 35, is particularly interesting for those who know Bethel College and General Conference history during that time period. J. R. Thierstein, professor of German and soon to become editor of *The Mennonite* was arrested. The full entry reads

J. R. Thierstein, Newton [actually he lived on the college campus]

Committed 12-7-36

Discharged 12-7-36

Cause of commitment: Not reporting acc. [accident]

Authority committing: C. H. Stewart [justice of the peace and police judge]

Remarks: Out on bond

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### FRIENDS OF THE MLA

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The “Friends of the MLA” is a name we use to promote a more active sense of local support and attention for the work of the archives and historical library. The main activity under this rubric has been several public programs per year on a variety of Mennonite topics. The “Friends” includes users of the archives and library, and participants—both audience and speakers—in our programs.

Since the last newsletter we have sponsored the following programs:

- Apr. 1, 2003, Ann Hostetler, “Mennonites, Indians, Poetry, and Peace: Anna Ruth Ediger and the Southern Cheyenne”
- Sept. 23, 2003, Leland Harder and Merrill and Boots Raber, “Family History beyond Names and Dates”
- Oct. 21, 2003, John Sharp, director of the MC USA Historical Committee, “Gatherers, Keepers, and Evangelists: Stewards of the Corporate Memory”

• Mar. 11, 2004, Brad Gregory, from Notre Dame University, “Reformation History and Ecumenism: Problems and Prospects”

• May 21, 2004, Owen Gingerich, speaking on his new book about Copernicus, *The Book Nobody Read* (co-sponsored with the Bethel natural science lecture series)

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### WEDEL BOOK SERIES

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In late 2001 we published vol. 12 in the C. H. Wedel book series, *Hidden Worlds: Revisiting the Mennonite Migrants of the 1870s*, based on Royden Loewen’s 1999 Menno Simons lectures here at Bethel. This volume was published jointly with the University of Manitoba Press.

In 2004 we reprinted vol. 5 of the series, *Nonviolent America: History through the Eyes of Peace*, edited by James C. Juhnke and Louise Hawkely. It was originally published in 1993, but there has been an ongoing demand for it. The reprint was co-published with the Mennonite publisher Pandora Press of Kitchener, Ontario. Pandora is able to do very small press runs—essentially printing on demand—very economically; this made it financially possible to do a reprint.

An additional volume in the series is expected during 2004, also co-published with Pandora Press: *Elements of Faithful Writing*, based on poet Jean Janzen’s Menno Simons lectures in 2003.

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### MENNONITE LIFE ONLINE

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Just a reminder that *Mennonite Life*, published by Bethel College since 1946, continues to publish quarterly on the web at <<http://www.bethelks.edu/mennonitelife>>.

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### GRANDMA DATA ENTRY

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The GRANDMA (Genealogical Registry AND Database of Mennonite Ancestry) database has significantly changed Mennonite biographical and family history research. The project is sponsored by the California Mennonite Historical Society (<http://www.fresno.edu/affiliation/cmhs/gpc/home.htm>)

The MLA has been submitting information to the GRANDMA database project from its early stages more than 10 years ago. We have focused mostly on original church membership record books that reflect the immigration to the plains states in the 1870s. So far we have entered all of the data from the following church record books and other sources:

- Alexanderwohl (Kansas) and its predecessors in Russia and Poland (Przechowka)
- Hoffnungsau, Inman, Kansas
- Bethesda, Henderson, Nebraska
- Evangelical Mennonite Brethren, Henderson, Nebraska
- First, Mountain Lake, Minnesota
- Karlswalder, Turner County, South Dakota
- a book labeled “Mennonite Gemeinde im Turner County,” South Dakota
- Emmanuel, Moundridge, Kansas
- Bergthal Mennonite Church, Pawnee Rock, Kansas
- Heinrichsdorf, Volhynia
- Michalin-Gnadenberg-Grace Hill record book of Volhynia and Kansas

- Lonetree (Holdeman) church of Moundridge, Kansas
- Friedenthal (Central Heights) church of Durham, Kansas
- scattered records of Low German Volhynian families
- Bethel Mennonite Church, Inman, Kansas
- the former Bruderthal Mennonite Church near Hillsboro, Kansas
- the former Johannestal churches near Hillsboro
- First Mennonite, Hillsboro
- Emmaus Mennonite Church, Whitewater, Kansas
- 9 of 11 vols. of Albert J. Ruth, "Ruth Family Genealogy," a typed compilation held by the MLA. (One of the 11 volumes is an index and another is a collection of photos and texts. These two volumes were not entered in the database.) Some financing for this project was provided by Dale and Bertha Galle of Moundridge, Kansas.

- Goessel, Kansas, Mennonite Church
- First Mennonite, Newton, Kansas.
- First Mennonite, Beatrice, Nebraska
- Hebron, Buhler, Kansas

Currently being entered are records of:

- First Mennonite, Halstead, Kansas
- First Mennonite of Christian, Moundridge

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**IDENTIFY THIS**

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Can you identify either of the unidentified photos below? The white stone building is likely in Russia. The wooden frame building is presumably somewhere in North America. Please contact us if you know anything about either of these.





[www.bethelks.edu](http://www.bethelks.edu)

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