

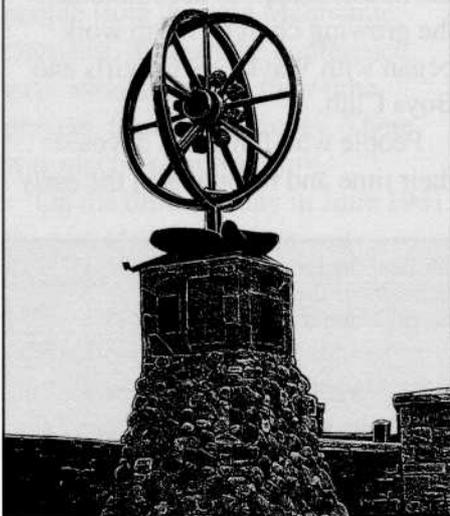
Ontario Mennonite History

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From Country Roads to City Streets

A Brief Story of Avon Mennonite Church in the
City of Stratford, Ontario

by Reta Baechler



First Summer Vacation Bible School 1951. *Supplied by Conrad Grebel College Archives.*

When we look at the history of the Avon Mennonite Church we must look back far beyond 1951. Back to when European immigrants found their way to Southeasthope and East Zorra Townships, in the Counties of Perth and Oxford. With this group of pioneers were the Amish Mennonite people moving west and south from the early settlements in Wilmot Township.

The early Mennonites were farm people, and their families bought the available farms in the community. In 1837 the East Zorra Mennonite Church was founded.

Establishing a country church was one thing, to have a church outreach in the city would be very different. There were Mennonite churches in Kitchener and London. What city in this western region might be a possibility? There were frequent discussions about this issue. Stratford was often mentioned, but would it really be available to begin an

outreach there, a somewhat 'English' settlement? There were positive feelings, but also many negative attitudes.

In the Summer of 1950, several interested persons campaigned some people in homes in the eastern part of Stratford along Romeo, Albert, Douro and Brunswick Streets. It was discovered that many in this area did not attend any church or Sunday School. Sunday morning was a time when parents slept in, and the children were left on their own roaming the streets. The east end was chosen because there was no other church building in this part of town. Parkview United Church was the nearest church building.

The motive to begin a work here in Stratford was not to take people away from their home church, but rather to reach the unchurched. The goal was not to be competitive in

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the Lord's work, instead to be a witness as an expression of a caring attitude.

The families visited in this general area appeared friendly, eager and willing to allow their children into our trust. Adults also expressed an interest in a Christian community.

In July 1951, the first Summer Vacation Bible School was held in a tent owned by the mission board of the Ontario Amish Mennonite Conference. The tent was put on a vacant lot at the corner of Romeo and Albert Streets.

Ross Bender was the superintendent of this school. Fifty-nine eager children had enrolled with an average attendance of thirty-five for a two week period. Most of the children were robust, anxious to be loved, with lots of vigor and energy. It appeared interest had been sparked in the community, and visits with the children's families continued during the following year. Visits were mostly in the evening, when people were home from work.

In the Spring of 1952, a house was bought on the corner of Romeo and Brunswick Streets. In July 1952, a second Summer Vacation Bible School was held. Following Summer Bible School, the first Sunday morning Sunday School classes were held in the two front rooms of this house, with nine children and four adults present. The second Sunday, nineteen attended. Regular Church and Sunday School services combined in September 1952.



The 1961 church building at 464 Brunswick Street. *Supplied by Conrad Grebel College Archives.*

In July 1953, Sunday evening and Friday evening services began. Ephraim Gingrich of Zurich, Ontario was appointed by conference as overseer. Ephraim was in charge of these meetings for one year.

Sunday morning and Sunday evening worship services continued, all held in the two front rooms of the house at the corner of Romeo and Brunswick Streets. Interested lay people from the conference, and especially members of Poole, East Zorra, Steinmann and Wellesley Mennonite churches assisted with their talents and gifts in speaking and music. They volunteered on a monthly basis.

In September 1954, the mission board purchased a lot next to the east side of the house/church on which was a small house owned by

the Wally Dingeman family. The mission board had in mind to build a church building there, sometime in the future.

In September 1955, Brother Jake Spenler, from Milverton, was invited to be our first pastor of this church, which now had 16 adults and approximately 30 children attending regularly. Brother Spenler, his wife Gladys, and daughters Eunice and Demaris moved into the house/church at 464 Brunswick Street. They occupied all of the house, except the two front rooms which was our meeting place.

In 1958, a garage was built onto the house/church to accommodate the growing church. Youth work began with Wayfarers for girls and Boys Club.

People who faithfully devoted their time and resources in the early

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formation of this church were; Ed and Lydiann Bast, Keith Lichty, Nelson Schwartzentruber, Isabel Steckley, Jean Ruby, Bertha Ruby, Mary Schultz, Oscar and Anna Mae Leis and family, Howard and Audrey Lebold and family, Alvin and Dorothy Lebold, Vernon and Betty Roth and family, Betty Schwartzentruber, Sam and Verna Martin, Noah and Winsome Kipfer, Floyd and Reta Baechler and family, and Violetta Yantzi.

In June 1958, the first ladies sewing circle, W.M.S.A., took place at Reta Baechler's place. Eight ladies attended the meeting. Anna Mae Leis was appointed president, and Betty Roth secretary. The evening was spent applique printed butterflies on white blocks. Dorothy Lebold was in charge of devotions - John 3:1-16. During the business meeting it was decided to bring a dime to each meeting for the treasury. Date squares were served by the hostess.

During the years 1958-1959 plans again emerged for a church building. Various projects by the conference were held to raise money.

In September 1960, sufficient funds had accumulated for a church building. The first sod was turned by Bishop Christian Streicher of Wellesley, Moderator of the Amish Mennonite Conference. Many people from the area Mennonite churches, through the conference, gave assistance with their time, prayers, talents and money. There was much volunteer work.

On the third Sunday in June 1961, the new church building was dedicated to the honour and glory of God. Bishop Clayton F. Derstine of Kitchener and Dale Nafziger of Ohio were the guest speakers.

A congregation had emerged. Summer Bible School produced a Sunday School. Sunday School led

to Sunday morning worship, Sunday evening services, Mid-week, etc, etc.

In the Spring of 1962, Brother Spenler, his wife Gladys and family, moved to Wallaceburg, Ontario. In June of that year, Kenneth R. Bender, a recent graduate from Goshen College, accepted the call to become pastor at Avon. Bro. Bender, his wife Anna and son Anthony moved into the house/parsonage. Brother Kenneth was licensed to preach for a two year period. In the Summer of 1964, Kenneth was ordained pastor, and continued in that role until June 1966.

In September 1966, Brother Arthur Leis, a missionary from Uganda, Africa accepted a call to lead Avon church. Brother Arthur committed himself to be our pastor while on furlough from Africa. Rev. Leis, his wife Gladys and children, Dorothy and David brought to the church a new vision of God's workings in other parts of His vineyard. Expecting to return to Africa, Brother Arthur resigned in the Spring of 1968.

On June 23, 1968, Winston Martin, Goshen College and Toronto Bible College graduate, was installed as Avon's pastor. Winston, and his wife Betty Anne, moved into the parsonage (later buying their own home). We remember Winston's challenging messages - focusing on God's greatness, goodness and faithfulness - to live our lives for the honour and glory of God. The years 1968-1970 will also be remembered as a time of population explosion. Ten new babies were born. Brother Winston Martin pastored Avon church until December 1973, when he accepted a charge at Blough church in Blough, Pennsylvania.

In June 1974, Rod and Doris Weber became our co-pastor team. Rod and Doris were graduates from

Eastern Mennonite College in Harrisonburg, Virginia. The Webers - which included their children Barbara, Julie, Kaye, Rodney, Dawn and Jerry - lived at R.R. #2, Petersburg on the family farm. Rod and Doris started at Avon church as half-time pastors, and half-time administrators of the Young Adult Centre for two years. Mel Lichty assumed the administrative role at the Young Adult Centre after two years.

In 1975, a Voluntary Service program, under the direction of the Mennonite Board of Missions of North America, began in Stratford. Volunteers lived in the parsonage, and worked at the Young Adult Centre on Waterloo Street - the former old YMCA building. VSers were involved with the Dew Drop Inn Coffee House, glass recycling, home repairs, Victim Offenders Program, and the South Western Hostel Association. The VS program in Stratford was terminated in 1980.

The removal of the Wally Dingeman house beside the church in 1977, greatly enhanced the property. A new church sign was also added to provide a much needed symbol that the church was alive and growing. Rod and Doris were both ordained on March 4, 1979. Avonholme was founded in June 1981. This is the former Avon parsonage at 464 Brunswick Street. It is for people with emotional and psychological disturbances, and acts as a transition home.

Pastors Rod and Doris Weber pastored Avon church for ten years. They preached their farewell message to Avon congregation August 26, 1984, Their message theme was taken from I Samuel 7:12 - "Hitherto hath the Lord helped us."

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Rod and Doris left to pursue their studies at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries in Elkhart, Indiana.

On October 1, 1984, Gary Horst, a graduate from Ontario Theological Seminary in Toronto, accepted a call to be pastor at Avon. Gary, his wife Brenda and children live at 207 Brunswick Street. Pastor Gary Horst was installed at the 11 a.m. service Sunday November 4, 1984. Avon church has been richly blessed to have a man of God with a genuine faith in Christ our Saviour. Rev. Gary Horst our servant/leader, our shepherd, our friend. The church has grown and continues to grow.

We had our last service at 464 Brunswick Street on Sunday July 31, 1994. Avon's church building at 464 Brunswick Street was purchased by the Stratford Church of Christ, which formerly held its services at Romeo Public School.

Avon church held its first worship service in its new facility September 16, 1994. The church dedication and open house followed on October 9, 1994. The new church building is part of a larger complex at 90 Greenwood Drive which

includes the Greenwood Court Seniors Complex and is operated by Tri-County Mennonite Homes.

On Sunday September 26, 1999, Anne Campion was installed as Associate Pastor. In her new position Ms. Campion's responsibilities are primarily in the areas of youth and young adult ministry and Christian education. She also serves in other general pastoral roles. She is serving along side Pastor Gary Horst, who continues to pastor at Avon Mennonite Church.

Avon's Statement of Purpose

As God's on-the-way people
By the enabling of the Holy Spirit
In the context of this time and
this place.

To be the praise of His glory
- reflecting in our corporate life
the nature of Jesus Christ.
Loving and building up one another
in Christ,
serving and equipping for service,
teaching, learning, fellowshiping,
worshiping,
And reaching out to make disciples
for Him.

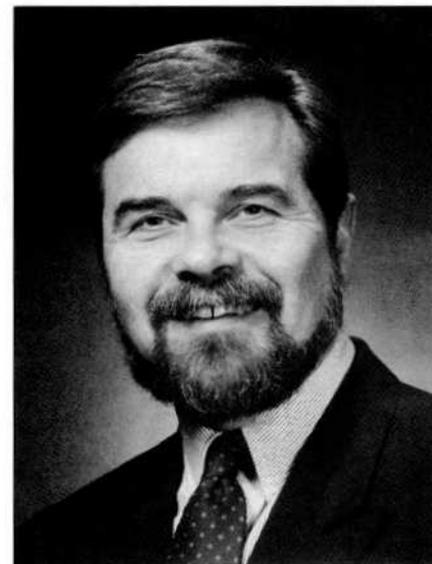
Reta (Schlegel) Baechler lives in Stratford. She is a long time member and historian for Avon Mennonite Church.



The 1994 church building at 90 Greenwood Drive. Supplied by Conrad Grebel College Archives.

Short Run Publishing and Print on Demand: New Possibilities of Local Historians

by Arnold Snyder



Arnold Snyder

Back in 1980, I had not yet learned to touch-type. I banged away happily (and fairly quickly) on a portable manual typewriter, using three fingers, impressing letters through a carbon ribbon onto paper. Then I was introduced to "word processing" on a huge IBM machine that was the property of the admissions office at the college where I worked. Before the year was out, I had learned to 'type' with all ten fingers - we still call it 'typing,' although our fingers are now creating electric impulses to be stored magnetically; we are no longer impressing 'type' onto paper.

Our family was bitten by the computer bug. By the next year we had borrowed the money to buy one of the first 'portable' computers

(the Osborne). In size and weight this computer put one in mind of a portable sewing machine - in other words, it threatened to pull your arm from its socket. The screen was the size of a postcard; if you were really ambitious, you could run the unit from a car battery. It felt very 'state of the art' to have joined the small company of personal computer owners.

Twenty years later, the micro processor has revolutionized many things, but especially the way that virtually everyone writes, stores, prints, and communicates information. Today, it would be exceptional indeed to find a local historian who did not use a computer as a word processor and information storage system. And now even my mother's generation has discovered the internet and uses it every day to communicate - something very few people knew about back when I bought the Osborne.

The revolution continues, and it has begun to transform book publishing. Twenty years from now I suspect that it will be rare indeed to find book publishers who rely exclusively on ink presses to produce their books. The way in which characters and letters are placed onto pages of paper has been changing dramatically not only for individuals, but also in the publishing industry.

Gutenberg invented movable type in 1450 A. D. The basic features of the process remained the pretty much same, right up to the electronics revolution. My portable typewriter was based on the same principles. In the Gutenberg process, type 'impresses' ink letters and characters onto sheets of paper, except unlike my typewriter, the press does the same process again and again and again. Once the

printing plate is set, and the press is set up, sheets of printed paper can come pouring out of the machine in quantity, driving down the price of individual copies. The genius of the system was in mechanical repetition: the higher the volume of impressions, the lower the cost per page. This was because the major expense in this process came from preparing the printing plates and setting up the machine to run properly. The ink and the paper were relatively inexpensive.

The disadvantage of the system became evident when one had to print lower numbers: 10,000 books could be printed, for example, for relatively few dollars more than it cost to print 2,000. Customers were often convinced to go with the higher numbers, since their 'cost per book' could be reduced drastically. It was too good a deal to pass up. Of course, the 'cost per book' calculation was based on the optimistic notion that all 10,000 books would be sold - and sometimes they even were! But when the books were not all sold, the cost per book went up accordingly. And usually, long before the unsold volumes were consigned to the shredder, those bulky books all had to be stored and looked after.

It was in this way that more than one publisher got into financial difficulty, sometimes becoming owners of vast warehouses full of tens of thousands (or millions) of unsold and unmarketable books - books that were produced at a theoretically low 'cost per book.'

Now back to computers and local histories. It has always been true that not every book that deserves to be printed needs to be produced in large quantity. In fact, many local histories and histories of local

congregations should be produced as 'short run' books, that is, books whose print run will fall somewhere between 200 and 800 copies. In the past, some of these books were printed at great expense; sometimes they were produced in too high a quantity; sometimes they were produced in awful-looking, cheap editions; and sometimes, they were not produced at all.

The good news is that computer technology has changed the process of printing and publishing books. It is now possible to produce handsome, professional-looking 'short run' books at an affordable price. But the news is even better than this. The new technology has made it possible to 'print on demand.' This means that one can print a minimal number of books for a modest investment, but have the potential to continue reprinting and binding the book if it happens to exceed expectations. The advantages of 'print on demand' are obvious: one is not investing money in thousands of books that may go unsold, and at the same time, guessing too low initially will not mean that a worthy book will have to be declared 'out of print.'

This revolution in publishing was made possible first by radical changes in software, and second, by advances in reproduction hardware. The software revolution came with the 'page making' programs. The tools that before had been available only to skilled designers in their studios all of a sudden became available to anyone with a personal computer. It became possible to access hundreds of different font types, for example, and to design sophisticated-looking pages that

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integrate text with scanned photographs and other graphic images. The remarkable results could be 'printed' on increasingly sophisticated machines that sat right next to the computer on anyone's desk top.

The hardware revolution that has moved electronic publishing into book publishing came with the general availability of high-end digital laser copiers. These copiers were so good that it was virtually impossible to tell, by the naked eye, whether one was holding a 'printed' document, or a 'copied' one. These digital laser machines even did a phenomenal job of reproducing photographs. Of course, the early models were very expensive, but that too has changed over time. Although the costs are still high, the newer, smaller machines are now within reach of small businesses interested in book publishing.

Pandora Press of Kitchener, Ontario came into existence in order to publish short run books using this new technology. Our purpose as a publisher was to make available modestly-priced books dealing with Anabaptist, Mennonite, and Believers Church topics, both historical and theological. The books we have published are titles we considered worthy, but that were not considered 'financially viable' by larger companies because the potential sales numbers were judged to be too low. We published our first title in 1995. Our present publisher's catalogue numbers 24 titles, still including that first book, which we continue to produce and sell, as required by demand.

We soon discovered that the 'short run' technology we had pioneered was applicable outside our own publishing house. Recently we have begun doing more and more 'custom publishing' for churches, historical societies, individuals (memoirs, etc.), and even for other publishers who require low initial runs of books. The services we offer include design and layout, if required, although we are also happy to function purely as 'printers' for those who come with fully laid out materials.

We would be happy to assist in the publication of worthwhile materials, especially (but not exclusively) relating to local historical topics. Anyone with interest in consulting on a possible project or collaboration can call us at (519) 578-2381 or come for visit to our location on 33 Kent Avenue in Kitchener. Our web site (www.pandorapress.com) contains a full catalogue and more information. We also can be contacted by email: arnold@pandorapress.com.

*Arnold Snyder lives in Kitchener.
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Managing Editor of Pandora Press.*

Book Review

Women without Men, Mennonite Refugees of the Second World War

by Marlene Epp
(Toronto: University of
Toronto Press, 2000)

275 pages.

Reviewed by Linda Huebert Hecht

Marlene Epp, a well known historian, faculty member at Conrad Grebel College and president of the Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario, breaks new ground in her book on the experiences of Mennonite refugee women of the Second World War. The refugee experience has not received much attention in either Canadian or Mennonite history. Based on her Ph.D. dissertation Epp describes how Mennonite women and children, the majority without husbands or fathers, were forced to leave their homes in the Ukraine, learn to survive in wartime conditions and face the challenges of resettling their female headed families in Paraguay and Canada. This is the major theme in the book, the intersection of gender, war and immigration.

In contrast to other refugees who fled the Soviet Union and eastern Europe during this time, the 12,000

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Mennonite refugees were unique in that women outnumbered men. Many of the men disappeared during the Stalinist purges or died during the war, leaving the women in charge. In order to give voice to the immigrant women, the author interviewed 34 individuals from the postwar immigration. These personal insights form the basis of her discussion along with published and unpublished recollections from this time period and archival sources on the role of the Mennonite Central Committee and the Canadian Board of Colonization. The actions and choices of these women over 30 years from the mid 1930's to the mid 1960's, as Epp describes them, form a significant part of Mennonite history that we have not heard previously.

The stories of the women are always put into context, both in historical background and the relevant Canadian and Mennonite literature. The disintegration of the Mennonite family in the Ukraine began in the 1930's with the all too familiar knock on the door of a Mennonite home from the secret police, come to arrest male members of the household. The majority of the men arrested never returned to their families. The arrests took place in part because the Mennonites were viewed as a 'religious sect' but more importantly, because they were of German ethnic background. The question of how ethnicity shaped the lives of Mennonite refugee families is a second theme of the book. Mennonite support for the German occupation of the Ukraine in 1941 only heightened the suspicions of the Soviet

government toward them, and by that year 50 percent of Mennonite families were without a male head. (page 36) The fragmentation and reconfiguration of Mennonite families is a third theme of the book.

With the retreat of the German army from the Ukraine in the Fall of 1943, the westward evacuation of the Mennonites and their life as refugees began. In her straightforward but sensitive manner Epp discusses the realities of refugee life for these women. Some developed a situational morality in relation to stealing food or protecting their children. Many suffered personal trauma as a consequence of rape. Epp also relates cases where divine intervention allowed the refugees to survive.

Once the Mennonite women were living in refugee camps relief workers began to describe them as 'weak' women. This is paradoxical after they had survived the desperate conditions of war and learnt to be self reliant and resourceful. The author finds it especially ironic that the word 'weak' was used to describe the Mennonite families (4,000 persons) who settled in Paraguay where the hardships of pioneering demanded strength in body and soul. In Paraguay the sex imbalance was particularly evident. In one village all of the 147 adult inhabitants when it was established were women, the eldest male being a thirteen year old boy. Often teenage boys took on the father role in the family. Epp suggests that Mennonite women in Paraguay had a certain "freedom from the rigid codes of behaviour that characterized North American Mennonitism in the 1950s." (page 91) Whether this was the case or not,

as soon as they could obtain sponsors, families began leaving Paraguay for Canada where they could get jobs in the cities and escape the desperation of subsistence farming in a hot climate.

Epp carefully describes aspects of the settling in process for the 8,000 Mennonite refugees in Canada.

No matter how successful the immigrant families were economically, the psychological effects of the war, and the loss of their husbands and fathers remained with them. Moreover, they could not live up to the Canadian and Mennonite ideal of the happy, united, nuclear family with a father as the head. In Canada their sense of belonging came from organized church life. Baptism was a mark of acceptance, says Epp, as much as an expression of faith.

Epp introduces the theme of each chapter by means of a personal story from an immigrant woman illustrating that her goal is not just analysis but "giving their stories the place they merit." (page 16) This she does ably and well in her clearly written, well researched style. I found the many details and personal stories of women and men in this book to be very informative. They helped me put the many refugee stories I have heard in my own family into perspective. This book is a welcome addition to Mennonite history and to the history of Mennonite women.

*Linda Huebert Hecht lives in Waterloo, Ontario and is co-editor of the book **Profiles of Anabaptist Women Sixteenth Century Reforming Pioneers.***

People and Projects

FRANK H. EPP MEMORIAL FUND

There were two recipients of the Frank H. Epp Memorial Fund in 2001. Dr. Royden Loewen (Chair of Mennonite Studies, University of Winnipeg, editor of *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, President of Mennonite Historical Society of Canada) was awarded \$2000 as a grant to assist him in the publication of his book *Hidden Worlds: Studies in the Mennonite Immigration of the 1870s*. One chapter of the book, *Mr. Plett and Mr. Bergey: Land and Social Practice in Two Canadian Communities, 1890s*, will include a comparison of a farmer from Manitoba and a farmer from Ontario. This book arose from the Menno Simons Lectures he gave at Bethel College, Kansas, in 1999.

Another \$1000 was awarded to Linda Huebert Hecht of Waterloo to continue in the archival processing of the Frank H. Epp Papers at Conrad Grebel College. She is a Board member of MHSO. The Epp Papers has over 22 file cabinets worth of material, this adds up to 175 linear feet of records to be processed.

ERB ST. CELEBRATES

The Erb St. Mennonite Church, in Waterloo, is celebrating the 150th anniversary of their first place of worship (the 1851 the meeting house). Karl Kessler is writing a book for the occasion which is expected to be published in late October 2001.

BUS TOUR TO ONTARIO

The Lancaster Mennonite Historical Society will be coming to Ontario on the weekend of August 17-19, 2001. Their bus tour will include stops of historical interest in Vineland and Waterloo County.

AMISH MENNONITE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Orland Gingerich has completed his part in the collecting of oral histories from members of the Amish Mennonite community in Ontario for the Institute for Anabaptist and Mennonite Studies at Conrad Grebel College.

BILINGUAL BOOK

Isaac R. Horst has released a new edition of his book *Separate and Peculiar* about the lives and customs of Old Order Mennonites in Ontario. The text in this version is written in both English and Pennsylvania German.

MENNONITE ENCYCLOPEDIA ONLINE

The *Canadian Mennonite Encyclopedia Online* (<http://www.mhsc.ca>), in less than one year, has received 100,000 visitors. It also recently was redesigned with better graphics to help people with their research on all things related to Mennonites. Now MHSC is looking at adding biographies to the encyclopedia of significant persons in the Canadian Mennonite church who are now deceased. If you have any suggestions, or would be willing to write a short (maximum 500 words) essay on someone, please contact Sam Steiner or Linda Huebert Hecht.

Book Notes

Alvin Roth, author of *My Journey* (Kitchener: Pandora Press, 2001), tells of his work as a pioneer in urban missions in Ontario. Alvin and Madeline Roth were instrumental in the formation of such mission and service institutions in London, Ontario as; Mission Services of London, Quintin Warner House, Rotholme Women's and Family Shelter, and Agape Fellowship.

Delbert F. Plett, editor of *Old Colony Mennonites in Canada 1875 to 2000* (Steinbach, Manitoba: Crossway Publications, 2001), 196 pages, has collected articles, family histories, photographs and historical documents to tell the story of this group of Mennonites, originally called the *Reinlander Mennoniten Gemeinde*. Since returning from Mexico, some

now live in Ontario. Most of the material used in this book were taken from *Preservings*, the newsletter of the Hanover Steinbach Historical Society in Manitoba, of which Plett is also the editor.

Victor D. Kliewer, editor of *Mennonite Peace Perspectives From Essex and Kent* (Leamington: Essex-Kent Mennonite Historical Association, 2001), 143 pages, has compiled a book that deals with the issue of peace from the experiences of Mennonites in the Leamington area. This is the third volume in the Essex-Kent Mennonite Historical Series.

Marion Roes, compiler of *Where Have All The Roeses Gone?* (Waterloo: Marion Roes, 2001) 165 pages, updates an 1976 genealogy

of the descendants of John and Polly (Yoder) Roes. It includes several family histories, archival photographs, and the ancestral charts of Maria/Polly Roes, David and Barbara (Roth) Roes, and John and Mary (Nafziger) Roes. The related families of Jacob Hochstetler and Reuben Yoder are also documented. This includes historical events involving the families settling in Pennsylvania in the 18th Century and their contact with the Native population. The cost is \$15 plus \$5 postage, and is available from:

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555 Brigantine Drive,
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email: mlroes@sympatico.ca