

# *MEET THE MENNONITES*

IN PENNSYLVANIA DUTCHLAND

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY MEL HORST

***Applied Arts Publishers***

Sixteenth Printing 1988



LEBANON, PA. 17042

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ISBN 0-911410-05-8

## Meet the Mennonites

The Pennsylvania Dutch population is made up of diverse religious groups. Broadly, there are two main classifications—the “plain people” and the “gay” or church people. The gay people include the United Brethren, Reformed, Lutheran and Evangelical, while the plain people are the Mennonites, Amish, River Brethren and Dunkards. A third group appears to emerge when the Moravians, Schwenkfelders, United Zion’s Children and similar groups are considered, for at one period of time they could have been considered to be plain people, but in contemporary times they are more similar to the church people. Likewise, some divisions of the Mennonite Church might well be reclassified.

The origin of most of the Pennsylvania Dutch churches results from the Protestant Reformation. In one sense the Moravian Church represents the earliest of the Protestant churches, although Martin Luther’s break with Rome is usually considered to be the beginning of the Reformation. The Mennonites result from the religious and social upheaval that was an important part of the break-up of the medieval world.

Most historians agree that the Mennonite origin was in the Anabaptist movement and directly related to Ulrich Zwingli in Switzerland. A small group of

Zwingli’s followers believed a sweeping change was necessary, and they became dissatisfied when a middle-of-the-road reform resulted. They were adamantly against infant baptism and dictation from the state on religious matters. When they refused to baptize their children they were looked upon as non-conformists and were persecuted. By January 21, 1525 some of these people baptized each other and formed what became known as the *Swiss Brethren*.

In the Netherlands another small group, followers of Martin Luther, also became involved in a theological conflict and formed what became known as the Anabaptist group. They decided to “shun” those who differed with their views. This action is of significance because the practice of shunning, or avoiding people who are excommunicated, became one of the major differences between some peoples of Mennonite heritage that has lasted to this day.

The term Mennonite is derived from Menno Simons, a Roman Catholic priest, who in 1536 turned his back on his church and became an important leader among the Anabaptist dissenters. In time, the Swiss Brethren and the Anabaptists of the Netherlands were joined together by mutual belief and became known as Mennonites.



*Martindale Mennonite Meeting House*



*Denver Mennonite Meeting House*

The Mennonites differed with the Lutherans and Reformed on baptism and on the role of the state in religious affairs. The Mennonites believed in a church of believers and were therefore against infant baptism; they were convinced that the state by nature would threaten liberty of religious conscience, and they therefore supported the separation of church and state. In other ways, too, they were different; they believed that the true church was destined to be persecuted and that true believers should separate themselves from political activities, including holding office; they believed in non-resistance and were therefore pacifists; they conceived of true believers as consisting of a brotherhood, and they practiced mutual aid; and they emphasized simplicity and non-conformity to the world. These ideas represent some of the major characteristics of Mennonite religious thought and are some of the reasons why followers of both Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli persecuted them. The story of these persecutions is well portrayed in *Martyrs Mirror*.

The Mennonites have also suffered from differences from within their ranks, and one of the major divisions occurred before the migration to America after Jacob Amman decided that church discipline was lax. Amman and some of his followers excommunicated some Mennonites because they did not conform to his strict interpretation of shunning or avoidance. As a result, conflict developed which resulted in a division in 1693, with his followers becoming known as *Amish*.

The Old World with its frequent wars and religious intolerance made the New World with the freedom it provided appear to be a veritable paradise. In 1683 the first Mennonites arrived in Pennsylvania. Then, as well as later, they were among neighbors who regarded them with envy and suspicion, under laws which most of them could not read, a language which most of them could not comprehend; under social customs which were unlike their own. The settlement at Germantown represented the first German colony in America and soon other settlements were established in southeastern Pennsylvania. In the eighteenth century Mennonites settled in Maryland

and Virginia and in the early nineteenth century in western states and Canada. Most of them became farmers.

In this centennial year of the beginning of the War Between the States, it seems appropriate to mention that the Mennonite Church was involved in the first American protest against slavery, when a document was presented at a Quaker meeting in 1688.

The Mennonites often refer to themselves as a "peculiar people" separate from the world. This separation includes the avoidance of worldly pleasures and has created a problem of interpretation which has been an important source for differences of opinion within the group and has led to some divisions. Simplicity, another Mennonite characteristic, has been an additional source of difference. Just what is proper simplicity and plainness? Evidence of simplicity ranges from plain dress to plain, neat meeting houses.

This booklet was produced to pictorially present some of the Mennonites of southeastern Pennsylvania. Obviously, restrictions of space allow for little more than a brief sketch of each group, and only a few words about some of the many and varied activities and characteristics. The subject has been further restricted to the southeastern section of Pennsylvania, and although the historical development and numerical concentration of the Mennonites makes this geographical area an integral part of Mennonite culture, it must be emphasized that the Mennonite Church operates in many states of our nation as well as in many areas of the world.

The reader should also realize that the material in this booklet is not balanced in relationship to the numbers of people represented. For example, the Mennonite Church constitutes the largest number of people, but in this booklet two pages are devoted to a small splinter group with only a handful of members and only eight pages for the main Mennonite body. However, several books and pamphlets about the main Mennonite body are available, but none that pictorially portray the smaller sects.

