

## History of the Mennonites in the Harman, W.Va., Area

By Kathryn H. Bucher

*Note: Most of the historical information is based on Harry A. Brunk's book History of Mennonites in Virginia: 1927-1960.*

The missionary activities of the Virginia Mennonite Church in West Virginia opened with the beginning of the Civil War when a Brother "Peter John" Heatwole, a layman, fled as a refugee from Virginia westward and northward. His pursuers were within shooting distance of him at times, but the obscurity secured by forests and hills saved him. As a final resort, he misled them by walking backwards in the snow, and escaped to the hospitable homes of the people of Pendleton Co., W.Va. While he was among these people, he taught them from the Bible and the *Confession of Faith*, which he carried in his coat pocket. At the close of the Civil War the ministry of the Mennonite Church began with occasional trips on horseback to visit the new sections where interest had been shown in the work of Brother Heatwole. Despite the losses which the Mennonites had sustained during the war, they were ready to go to 75 or 80 miles over difficult mountain terrain to preach the Gospel.

Preachers of the Virginia Conference had carried the Gospel into parts of Pendleton, Randolph and Tucker counties in the 1870s. The first preaching service in Randolph Co. (where Harman is located) was in a schoolhouse near Job, 5 miles south of Harman. This was a Mennonite circuit-riding type of preaching, as these appointments were close enough that they could go to the next place, announce their presence, arrange for and hold a service and then pass on to the next place and repeat the same procedure. By 1887 the roads had improved enough to make transportation by carriage possible across the four mountains.

In 1890 services were held at 3 schoolhouses between Job and Whitmer (10 miles south of Harman). It was noted that these trips to West Virginia had been made with the regularity of a ferry from April to October of each year for nearly 30 years. These Mennonite circuit riders (rode horseback) made monthly trips and encountered many difficulties. The crossing of 3 rivers was at times hazardous, as they were often swollen and had to be forded. The preachers often walked "many a mile." It took them 2½ days of continuous riding (either horseback or carriage) and walking to make the 80-miles jaunt from Harrisonburg, Va., to Job, W.Va. They did do some retracing in their tours, but frequently preached or filled appointments going and coming. *Note: Rhine Benner helped build the Bethel Mennonite Church at Job.*

The first service held at the Lambert schoolhouse was in early 1900. These circuit riders had to go 6 or 7 miles west from Job across precipitous Rich Mt. and ford another river, then ascend the slopes of Middle Mt. This point was over 100 miles from Harrisonburg and the roads were still steep, very rough and winding—not much changed from the '70s. Before 1900, 10 schoolhouses had been used for these preaching appointments in Randolph Co. These were the best public buildings that the people of West Virginia had to offer for services. Most of the buildings were poorly lighted with tallow candles, but the Lord had indeed done a great work through these early evangelists of the Mennonite Church and many souls were won for Him in the West Virginia highlands.

From 1902 on, workers were placed in the field in the vicinity of Job, which was the center of activity. By 1920 the Horton Presbyterian Church was bought for \$150.00. A Mennonite Church was established at Horton, a suburb of Whitmer. Earlier there had been a booming lumber business in the Horton-Whitmer area where 100 carloads of lumber left daily via railroad, which ran through Whitmer. Some of the mission workers were employed by the lumber company and thus many contacts were made with local people. In the '30s and '40s there was an exodus from the once booming Job, Whitmer and Horton areas. School buildings were abandoned as consolidation of schools moved in. Bethel (Job) and Horton (Whitmer) were no longer the most important churches—now it was Riverside, Lambert and Lanesville. *Note: Bethel was supposedly the first Mennonite church west of the peak of the Alleghenies, about 1906 or 1907.*

Services began at Riverside in the Pennington schoolhouse, 2 miles north of Harman in 1932. A church was built and dedicated in 1935 on the west side of State Rt. 32. This became the largest of the churches on the west side of the Allegheny Mountain and still is today, according to membership. However, a flash flood in '85 nearly swept the church away, but a huge log miraculously saved it by causing the raging Dry Fork River to change its direct course at the church and go around it in two separate rivers! Much damage was done to the church and extensive repairs were necessary. Sunday School rooms, a library, kitchen and restrooms were added with dedication of the new building in August 1987.

In 1949 a new church was built in Lambert hollow with a basement, Sunday School rooms and a furnace room along one side. It stood on the side of the mountain and terrain had to be graded and walls built, which was in '53 and '54. Services are held here regularly.

The Lanesville Church is 8 miles north of Harman in Tucker Co. The church was built by the Brethren people, but they were not able to keep it going and the church stood empty for a time. In 1954 the Mennonites were permitted to use the building and in 1959, a contract was executed and signed between the Mennonite and Brethren churches regarding the use of the church building. A small group of Mennonites and Brethren still have Sunday School each Sunday and a preaching service once a month.

The Mennonites in Randolph and Tucker counties have varied jobs and occupations. A physician (lives at Harman) is retired from 44 years of serving the community in a general-practice office and is now Medical Director of 3 nursing homes in the area. There are school teachers and bus drivers, nurses, a dietician, a nursing home administrator, a social worker (who works at the hospital in Elkins), a couple who is overseer of VS units and leaders at Retreats; an engineer at a power plant, and several are employed at local state parks and resort areas—tourism is one of the main sources of income in West Virginia. Several men are building contractors and others work for them. Some families have truck patches and raise berries and produce to sell at local farm markets. Then there are the pastors, who shepherd the flocks and provide spiritual help and comfort to those in need.