

SEARCHING FOR A USABLE PAST?

In early May of 1969, I submitted a 37-page research paper to Dr. Keith Sprunger, in partial fulfillment for the requirements of the course, Social Science Seminar, at Bethel College. Entitled “Anabaptism: A Search for a Usable Past,” the research and writing of that paper was arguably the most transformative research project of my life; more so, even, than the 232-page master’s thesis I completed fifteen years later. Why so transformative? Because in the course of that research and writing during the academic year 1968-69, I became a convinced and convicted Mennonite—a Mennonite not because I was the son of Richard and Lizzie Schrag, not even because I was a baptized member of Eden Mennonite Church; a Mennonite because I discovered in those Anabaptists a theology and practice that made eloquent and convincing theological sense.

Indeed, I often compare that experience to the story of Loren Swartzendruber’s “Mennonite conversion,” a story that I suspect most of you have heard since I tell it at every opportunity. Loren, you may recall, grew up on a farm near Kalona, Iowa. He attended Iowa Mennonite School, and when he graduated, his father gave him two options for college: Hesston College or Eastern Mennonite College. Loren didn’t want to go to either one. He wanted to go thirty miles up the road to the University of Iowa, because that’s where his sweetheart Pat Swartzendruber was going (yes, she was also a Swartzendruber). But he trundled off to EMC, had an awful year because he spent most of the time pining for Pat. The next year his dad relented and he transferred to the University of Iowa. He and Pat soon married, and after sporadic attendance at First Mennonite Church in Iowa City, they began attending regularly an Evangelical Free Church in the suburbs. They were very active—youth sponsors, Loren was named an elder (the youngest in the congregation’s history). Eventually, Loren felt called to the pastorate and applied and was accepted at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois.

Before moving to Illinois, Loren stopped in at First Mennonite Church to bid farewell to Pastor Ed Stolfus, and—presumably—to bid farewell to the Mennonite Church of his youth. Ed listened to Loren’s story, and then got up from his chair, walked to his bookcase, and pulled out this book: *The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision*. He made Loren promise to read the book from cover to cover. Loren did. Pat did. And they found their church—not because their last name was Swartzendruber, nor because the book had good recipes for shoofly pie, but because they found within its pages an eloquent and convincing theology. So Loren did go to seminary, but he went back to Harrisonburg, Virginia, to Eastern Mennonite Seminary, and then on to a distinguished career as a Mennonite pastor and Mennonite college president.

So I’m reluctant to belittle in any way that social science seminar paper I handed in in May of 1969, but I want to go back to its title. In 1969 I thought it an absolutely brilliant title. I remember meeting Keith Sprunger in his office in early spring of that year to talk about my research. He asked me if I had chosen a title. I proudly said, “Anabaptism: A Search for a Usable Past.” I waited for him to say, “Oh Dale, that’s brilliant.” Instead, he said, “Borrowing from Henry Steele Commager’s essay, I see.” I knew the name, Henry Steele Commager, but I had never read the essay. Nevertheless, I muttered some kind of agreement, and our discussion of the research

continued. I distinctly remember walking out of that tiny office in the southeast corner of the Administration Building, thinking “He sure didn’t seem very impressed with my title.” I’ve never asked Keith why he wasn’t impressed, but, once I finally read Commager’s essay (long after I graduated from Bethel, I might add), I have my suspicions.

In the essay, Commager argues that in contrast to the nations of Europe, the new America had no history—no past. Oh, indeed, it had a Native American past, but the Doctrine of Discovery dictated that those indigenous people didn’t count. In fact, as “uncivilized” heathens, they were scarcely people. So these white European colonists had to make their own “usable” past. The task, according to Commager, fell not to historians, but to literary types, writers and artists. Commager concludes his essay with these words: “And what a past it was—splendid, varied, romantic, and all but blameless, in which there were heroes but no villains, victories but no defeats—a past that was all prologue to the Rising Glory of America.”

Now, I may be wrong, but I’m guessing that is the American past that most of us learned in elementary school, and very likely in high school as well. Scholars may have had a much more realistic and accurate view of the American past and its considerable flaws, but I don’t think the average American was aware in any meaningful sense. Oh yes, there had been slavery, but the Doctrine of Discovery could be interpreted to suggest that we had done the Africans a favor by bringing them to Christianity and civilization, and besides, slavery had been outlawed by the thirteenth amendment to the U. S. Constitution. It’s all good.

And then along came the 1960s. Whether it was in response to the Vietnam War, as Ken Burns and Lynn Novick seem to imply in their masterful film on Vietnam, or simply a case of ideas whose time had come, that “usable past” that Commager describes came under serious attack. Works aimed not at scholars, but at the general public began to appear, and were widely read. Dee Brown’s *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* told the story of settling the West from a Native American perspective. It was a story of cruelty and genocide that most definitely had villains—and occasional defeats. Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* exposed a long history of environmental degradation. And light was shined on the unconscionably ugly history of slavery, its impact and its aftermath, with popular works like John Howard Griffin’s *Black like Me* which seemed to prove conclusively that people in this country were judged by the color of their skin rather than by the content of their character. And the movements for Civil Rights led by men like the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Cesar Chavez kept these issues front and center before the general public.

In fact, I wonder if one cannot claim that that search for a usable past described by Commager is not a major cause of the political dysfunction that currently characterizes this country. A certain percentage of the populace wants desperately to return to that positive and romantic vision of the American past that Commager describes by overlooking or ignoring the considerable evidence to the contrary; an opposing percentage of the populace is so focused on the evidence to the contrary that they can scarcely acknowledge anything good or heroic or noble in that American past.

Is this why Keith Sprunger was less than enthusiastic about the title of my seminar paper? Is there something intrinsically wrong with trying to fashion a “usable past”? I’m inclined to say that there

may be. Almost by definition, it suggests ignoring or disputing or at least forgetting any and all historical facts that negate or diminish the idealized past that one has fashioned. Indeed, totalitarian regimes throughout history have effectively insisted on constructing just such a “usable past,” and dismissing or discounting any and all evidence to the contrary. But as Timothy Wengert suggested in his final Menno Simons Lecture at Bethel College three weeks ago, “such forgetfulness [or nefarious intentionality] never serves us well.” The best antidote to this carefully constructed, “usable past,” says Wengert, is “history itself and the careful telling of that history.” We might add “the *comprehensively accurate* telling of that history.” We need to get the whole story.

So where does this leave my seminar paper in 1969? I don’t think I ignored or forgot or disputed any part of the 16th-century Anabaptist story in that paper. I must, however, freely confess that my enthusiasm for the Anabaptist story contributed to my ignoring or dismissing much of the subsequent 450 years of Mennonite history and culture. That subsequent history simply could not measure up to my idealized, “usable past” of sixteenth-century Anabaptism. But in so doing, in my suspicion of genealogy and ethnic identity, in my suspicion of SMCHA, I was clearly not considering the whole story. And, as Tim Wengert suggests, that story needs to be told in its entirety.

To take just one example, in the last few years two books have been published making it abundantly clear that Mennonites have been profoundly influenced by the cultures in which they find themselves. Mark Jantzen’s *Mennonite German Soldiers* and Ben Goossen’s *Chosen Nation* reveal how quickly the Mennonite commitment to pacifism and nonviolence can dissipate in a radically nationalistic and militaristic culture. This fact should give American Mennonites pause as we observe the direction our country appears to be headed, but it also may provide some clues to the unique past of this congregation at Eden Mennonite Church.

One of the enduring mysteries surrounding that group of Swiss Volhynian Mennonites who sailed on the *City of Richmond* in August of 1874 is the radical church split that occurred a mere twenty years after they landed. I confess I don’t know that much about this history. Remember, I’ve largely ignored it for these many years. But I’m wondering if Jantzen and Goossen’s findings about the power of the prevailing culture on Mennonite values and practices provide a clue. Our tendency is to assume homogeneity among those émigrés on the *City of Richmond*. After all, they were all members of the *Stuckigemeinde*, they all loved *Bohne Beroggi*. The truth of the matter, however, is that the families on that ship did not have uniform histories. There were two distinct streams of these Swiss Mennonites, streams that finally came together in Volhynia (or did they?). There may even have been differences at the very outset. Some came originally from Canton Zurich in Switzerland; others (probably most) came from Canton Bern. In the sixteenth century these were, in essence, different states, different nations if you will. They were both part of the Swiss Confederation; they were both Protestant, but they were not the same nation. Each would have sent its own diplomats to negotiate with the powers of Europe and with each other. Some of our ancestors emigrated to Alsace; some to the Palatinate in Germany; some to Montbeliard in France. Some eventually settled in Kotosufka; some eventually settled in Neumanufka. Conventional wisdom suggests that the two villages more or less merged into one, even though they were three miles apart. And Kotosufka became the chosen moniker. So you won’t find the name Neumanufka on any monuments two miles south of here, or in the capsule history of Eden

Mennonite Church that one finds on its web site. But is that an accurate record? We know that there was a major falling out between Elder Jacob Stucky and Peter M. Krehbiel. We know that both Elder Jacob Stucky and minister Jacob Goering had roots in Montbeliard . We know that all the Krehbiels came from the Palatinate (no matter if they spell their name Kraybill like the former MCs, or if they spell it the right way.). What role did those geographic/cultural differences play in the division? Did Peter Krehbiel come from Kotosufka, or did he live in Neumanufka? Does anyone know?

And how do we find out? We find out if and when someone expended the time and effort to collect and preserve records. Next summer Margo and I are going to Poland to learn something about her unique family history. She, as you may know, is from the other side of the Turkey Creek—way on the other side, from Mountain Lake, Minnesota. Her ancestors lived in Poland longer than they lived in Russia. In preparation for that trip we've been reading about Polish history. One of the books talks about the Warsaw Ghetto. According to Wikipedia, the [Warsaw Ghetto](#) was the largest of all the [Jewish ghettos in Nazi-occupied Europe](#) during [World War II](#). It was established by the Nazis in the fall of 1940. There were over 400,000 Jews imprisoned there,^[4] in an area of 1.3 square miles, with an average of 7.2 persons per room;^{[6][7]} barely subsisting on meager food rations.^[7] From the Warsaw Ghetto, Jews were deported to [Nazi camps](#) and mass-killing centers. In the summer of 1942 at least 254,000 Ghetto residents were sent to the [Treblinka extermination camp](#). The death toll among the Jewish inhabitants of the Ghetto is estimated to be at least 300,000 killed by bullet or gas,^[8] combined with 92,000 victims of rampant hunger and hunger-related diseases, the [Warsaw Ghetto Uprising](#), and the casualties of the final destruction of the Ghetto in April of 1943—a destruction ordered personally by Adolf Hitler himself. How do we know so much about activities in the Warsaw Ghetto? We know, at least in part, because among the committees formed by the Jewish underground was an archives committee. They knew that the Nazis would never include the story of the Warsaw Ghetto in their “usable past.” So they collected documents and stored them in metal boxes and cream cans. And all but one of the cream cans survived the final Nazi destruction of the Ghetto. What an example of archival foresight!

So who has collected and preserved and organized documents so that you can learn more about your unique past? The Mennonite Library and Archives at Bethel College! The following text and photos are largely the work of John Thiesen, co-director of libraries at Bethel and director of the MLA. John, incidentally, has three times achieved the highest score in the nation on the Academy of Certified Archivists exam. His second score has subsequently been matched by a few others, but John took the exam recently and scored even higher, making his score the highest ever recorded in the history of the exam.

The Mennonite Library and Archives (hereinafter referred to as the MLA) at Bethel College has multiple roots. The first president of Bethel, C. H. Wedel, had an active interest in Mennonite history. He wrote a four-volume Mennonite history text (in German, unfortunately) and probably was involved in some collecting of historical materials at the college.

In 1911 at the triennial session of the General Conference Mennonite Church in Bluffton, Ohio, a number of General Conference leaders, inspired by C. H. Wedel who had died in 1910, formed a Mennonite Historical Association. H. R. Voth, a former General Conference missionary in Oklahoma and Arizona, was active in the Association and did most of the detail work, keeping ledgers of historical items collected. H. P. Krehbiel was also an active promoter of historical interests and the Association's collections were kept at his publishing office (Mennonite Weekly Review) for a time. After Voth's death in 1931, the Association became less active.

Abraham Warkentin, a Mennonite refugee from Russia in the 1920s, professor of German at Bethel and a pastor at First Mennonite Church in Newton, became involved in collecting both with the Association and at the college. In 1939 the Association turned over its materials to a new General Conference Historical Committee. Some of the materials were turned over to the college and some remained at the Herold Publishing Company. When Warkentin moved to Chicago in 1947 to be the first president of the General Conference Seminary there, some of the materials went with him to the new institution.

The first home of the MLA was in the basement of the old Science Hall.

Cornelius Krahn, another Mennonite refugee from Russia, came to Bethel in 1944 and became the most well-known promoter of historical collecting for the college and the General Conference. His involvement from the 1940s to the 1970s made him almost synonymous with the MLA.

Also, during these same decades, John F. Schmidt was the internal face of the archives, bringing organization to the records that had been and were being gathered, and serving researchers who wanted to use them. He was also the keeper of many oral traditions about the archives.

Despite the close ties with the General Conference Historical Committee, the General Conference only designated the MLA as its official repository in 1964. At that time, many records were transferred from General Conference offices, or the possession of individual General Conference leaders, to the MLA. According to oral tradition, for example, P. H. Richert, long-time chair of the mission board, had kept the mission records in breakfast cereal boxes, one month of papers per box. One can still see the bend in the paper from this storage method.

Once the MLA became the official repository for General Conference archives, the conference paid an annual subsidy to Bethel College to support the collecting, organizing, and servicing of the records. When the General Conference gave way to Mennonite Church USA in 2002, MCUSA covenanted to continue supporting the MLA, to the tune—most recently—of \$43,000 per year. You are probably aware that, as a result of declining membership, the MCUSA has determined that it can no longer afford that subsidy, and it ceased entirely on 30 June 2017. The MLA is now funded entirely by Bethel College.

The MLA currently has some 37,000 book volumes, 9000 periodical volumes, 6600 cubic feet of archival holdings, and about 1.2 terabytes of electronic records. Some 150,000 images are

available on the MLA web site, including scanned photos, scans from microfilms, and scanned paper documents.

A little over a quarter of MLA's archival records are from the former General Conference. 17% are Bethel College records. Personal papers of individuals and families make up a little over a third. The remaining miscellaneous (a little over 20%) includes things like Western District Conference records, congregational records, some other area conferences such as South Central, Mountain States, and Pacific Southwest, and records of various small organizations.

Usage of the archival records is concentrated in the personal papers and congregational records.

The books and periodicals are mostly on the main floor of what used to be the college library from 1953 to 1986.

The archival collections are stored in a variety of places, some of them not ideal in terms of climate control. A large part is stored in the basement of the old library building, which used to be the main public space of the MLA.

The vault is also down here, with rare books, some restricted archival items, and framed art items.

Another large segment of archival materials are in the MLA 3rd floor, or attic, which is not climate controlled.

Then we have another storage area in room 305 of the Administration Building, the northwest corner of the top floor. No climate control.

We also have some materials stored at the MCUSA offices on Main Street in the former Faith and Life Press warehouse space, which has good climate control.

Some examples of the collections:

Here's the classic image of archives, paper documents, many of them typed rather than handwritten, nicely arranged in clean folders in order.

Here is a newer way to access archives, quickly becoming a classic—documents on the web. These documents tend to be less orderly, but more convenient. Anyone with an internet connection can look at these things. But obviously not everything has been scanned. John has calculated that the MLA has about 11 million pages of material (64 tons). It would take around 13 years of 8 hour days to scan it all with current technology. And that doesn't count the organizing part of the job, just the scanning. Organizing it would likely take about three times as long.

You might think that archives contain old stuff—and you'd be correct. The 1522 Erasmus Greek and Latin New Testament is the oldest item in the collection.

Or a nice van der Smissen family tree from a book dated in the 1700s. The van der Smissens claim to be able to trace their ancestry to Charlemagne (in the year 800).

The archives contain multiple languages: Martha Voth diary (legible German script); H. R Voth diary (less legible German script); H. R. Voth shorthand (impossible German script); But also Cheyenne, Hopi, Russian, Dutch, Spanish, French, Polish, Hungarian, Japanese, Chinese, Hindi, etc.

Many things in the archives are visually interesting: Plat of addition showing North Newton as part of Newton in 1887 and later; Proudfoot and Bird drawing of the Ad Building.

We have a variety of technological formats in the archives: Wire recording; Umatic cassette; Microfilm; CD.

Sometimes you find documentation for things that never happened: Fantasy map of Bethel College.

And some things are just weird: Hairy Bible.

Clearly the Mennonite Library and Archives is a treasure. But its future is, at some level, uncertain. MCUSA has ceased its critical subsidy, though it has agreed to let the General Conference archives remain at Bethel. But space is obviously inadequate. Staffing is minimal. Environmental controls are needed. In an effort to ensure maintenance of the current situation (with all its inadequacies) we are attempting to raise a one million dollar endowment to replace the MCUSA subsidy. We are half-way there, with a little over \$500,000 pledged or in hand. We are asking folks to cherish this treasure, ensuring its continued existence and growth, by contributing to this MLA Operating Endowment. And even after this lengthy presentation, you may be asking “Why should I bother?”

If you care at all about Bethel College, its Mennonite identity and its academic reputation, you should commit to cherishing the treasure of the MLA. Some years ago the Kansas History Teachers Association had to change the rules for its undergraduate history paper contest so that Bethel students wouldn't win every year. Why did Bethel students always win? It was in no small part because of excellent teaching by Keith Sprunger and Jim Juhnke, continued now by Mark Jantzen and Kip Wedel, but it was also because Bethel students had ready access to primary source material in the MLA and could therefore engage in the kind of research that professional historians do. As a result, their research papers were always a cut above the rest.

In this MCUSA era, if you are still enamored of the General Conference Mennonite Church and its vision of progressive Mennonite theology, of caring more about preserving the central tenets of the faith and less about boundary maintenance, you should commit to cherishing the treasure of the MLA. The MCUSA has decreed that those records will remain at Bethel College, and you can rest assured that the MLA will continue to collect any and all documents and personal papers that have a bearing on the history of the General Conference.

Finally, if you have a passion and a hope for theological and ecclesiological renewal of the broader Mennonite church you should commit to cherishing the treasure of the MLA. Mennonites, perhaps

more than any other denomination, have relied on the past for renewal of the present and preparation for the future. It happened to Thieleman Janz van Braght in 17th-century Holland with his publication of the *Mirror of the Martyrs*. It happened to Loren and Pat Swartzendruber in Iowa City in the 1960s. And it happened to Dale Schrag in 1969—largely in the Mennonite Library and Archives.

At least 90% of my research for that social science seminar paper was conducted in the MLA. Dr. Krahn gave me a key so I could work after hours. I took Margo there on dates. (She was not a bit impressed, but she married me anyway!) Don't deny current and future students and scholars the chance for an equally transformative experience. Cherish the treasure, consider contributing to the treasure that is the Mennonite Library and Archives at Bethel College!

Presentation by Dale Schrag, to the Swiss Mennonite Cultural and Historical Association 2017 Banquet at Eden Mennonite Church on Thursday, October 26, 2017