

## THE MOST UNFORGETTABLE CHARACTER I'VE MET

Everyone, both young and old, in this large Mennonite community called him "Book Bear". In later years I understood that his name was Baehr and that he was a book peddler.

Obviously this was the reason for his nickname, instead of it having any relation to a ferocious animal as so many of us children presumed. Our parents had instructed us not to call him "Book Bear" to his face, since that might meet with disapproval from this sensitive old man. Thus, whenever he was within hearing distance, we used only pronouns referring to him, since in our estimation he had no other name.

Noone seemed to know exactly where he came from nor when, except that originally he had migrated from Germany. The German language was very dear to him, and that probably accounted for this German community's readiness to adopt him. He was of medium stature, had blue eyes and curly blond hair, somewhat graying. His appearance was that of a typical German. He apparently had no relatives and no home, and no means of livelihood other than book peddling. He had in some manner found his way into the hearts of these people who took it upon themselves to be responsible for his keeping.

His means of conveyance consisted of a pair of ponies hitched to a top-buggy. To him these ponies were not merely animals, but his dearest friends. I well remember hearing him speak to these ponies as if they were human beings, spending hours alone with them, and fondly carressing them with his

arthritis crippled hands. They received expert care, and I wouldn't be surprised to know that the poor old man himself occasionally missed a meal or two, but I feel confident his ponies were always well-provided for.

His personal belongings consisted of the clothes on his back, a couple of suitcases, a deck of well-worn cards, and the books he packed in his buggy in pasteboard boxes.

Visitors at our farm home were infrequent; therefore, prospects for overnight guests created great excitement for the children. We were over-joyed to see a buggy slowly coming down our long drive way, but as we called through the kitchen door, "Mother! Mother! Book Bear is coming!", our mother did not always share our joy. She was a busy woman with farm chores to tend to besides a large family to care for, and this occurrence meant an extra mouth to feed and an extra bed to be made up. His arrival on a Friday meant that he would be a week-end guest. My parents were pious people and took seriously the quotation, "What ye have done unto the least of these my brethern, ye have done unto me", and never gave begrudgingly, though at times inconveniently.

He had great pride and would never ask for a night's lodging. No matter what the time of day or what the weather conditions, if there was no invitation forth coming, he would drive to the next farm house. His greeting was always the same, "Whoa! Hello! Hello-o-o!". After a discussion on such general topics as the weather and the crops, my father inevitably would ask him to stay for dinner and overnight. This invitation he always accepted after a slight hesitation, saying, "Well, if it suits you and you insist".



He had a cheerful personality. He constantly whistled gay tunes, repeating his favorite ones until they became monotonous, but were so much a part of his personality we would have missed them had they been discontinued. I also vividly remember him singing, "Chingle Bells! Chingle Bells! Chingle all the way.", with his German accent.

Upon an occasion such as a holiday he would stay at one home for as much as two weeks at a time. At these times he showered the children with oranges, candy, and occasionally picture story books.

He arose very early each morning, his first thought being to care for his ponies. Frequently children played pranks on him, such as nailing the oats bin shut. This came about as a result of parents' remarks about the generous feedings he gave his ponies. They messed with the harness, and even sawed the tongue of his buggy in two. He must have been a wonderfully good-natured man who loved children, for I never heard a complaint from him. He came to church regularly and upon occasions taught a Sunday School class.

His favorite passtime consisted of competitive games such as cards or checkers. He always carried a well-worn pack of cards. He preferred to compete with adults, but in their absence children would be a welcome substitute. He played his games very seriously and became morose if at the losing end and be at the height of glory while winning. He sacrificed no games to children, but always played to the best of his ability. Consequently, I remember playing game after game of Rook with him, losing one hand after the other, and feeling a real sense

of accomplishment if through some streak of luck I chanced to win one.

After dinner, oh, happy time! The cards were laid away and all the family gathered around the dining room table giving him an opportunity to display his assortment of books. Always we felt confident that if we found one particularly suited to our taste father would buy it, out of a sense of responsibility to help the old man. There were picture books for children, fiction, Bible books, prayer and hymn books, and Christmas cards. It was a wonderful evening for book-loving children who knew no such diversion as television or movies.

Occasionally he would decide to take a trip to another state. We wondered what had become of him, but always within a few months time he was back in the community again bringing delightful new tales of his experiences.

Recently, having been away from the farm for more than fifteen years, I made some inquiries concerning the fate of our friend Book Bear. It seems as he grew older his book sales, which had never proved profitable, dropped and finally he discontinued peddling books, but still made the rounds from farm to farm in his buggy as he had done for many years, even though his method of conveyance belonged almost entirely to another age. Finally his health failed and he died in a distant old peoples' home. Some of his benefactors attended his funeral, possibly out of a sense of duty, but more likely because they had never lost this feeling of being responsible for one of "these brethern" in need.

-- Ada Mae Goering