

FERN GOERING RECALLS HER LIFE IN THE CHURCH

Fern Goering's husband, Roland R. Goering, pastored several Mennonite churches. She was interviewed by Heather Holcomb on June 24, 2011.

HH: [I heard] that you dated 72 different boys in school [laughter].

FG: See ... the upbringing is again altogether different. I use that example every once in a while because now a boy will meet a girl and they start dating and they stay together until the break-up or get married. But most of them, these young kids, they will date the same girl over and over again. Now, I grew up in the Eden Church. I had a date with a different boy every Sunday, every Sunday afternoon. That was true of every girl in the community. "Do you have your arrangements made?" [the boys would ask] on Sunday afternoon, and they'd say who they are. I'd say, "No." "Would you go out with me?" I'd say, "Yeah." Then we always went to church and the women sat on one side and the men on the other side and they would walk up with me to the church and then they would go down and go there and then these hundred kids would get together after the church. "Where's the party tonight?" And often it was at our house, but there was no food and we would pay folk games.

HH: Play what kind of games?

FG: Folk games ... we were singing and it was sort of like ... no it wasn't square dancing ... I'll sing this song:

*I've been to New York,
I've been to Dover,
I've been the whole, the whole world over,
Over and over, ten times over,
Turn the whiskey bottle over,
Right and to your neighbor,
Left and to the next you meet.*

That's when we would go to the next couple ... we would sing a song, or "Bingo was His Name," or we'd sing all these different songs, and when we were done with that song we'd go to the next couple and to the next. We'd do that all evening long and that's how our Sunday evenings went. Every Sunday evening it would be someone else. When my husband started to ask me for dates — I would say about every five weeks — they would already start talking.

HH: Because you were going with him so often?

FG: Yeah. Otherwise it was every Sunday, and a lot of these 72 that I had — I think it was 73 — I had only one date with ... If you turned one down, you pretty well turned most of them down. You know: "Well, I asked Fern, but she didn't go with me." Well, the next guy would say, "Well, I'm not going to ask Fern. She might not go with me." ... "I got canned" they would say. "I got canned, she didn't go with me." But I don't know that I ever turned anyone down.

There was one evening — this has nothing to do with Mennonites, except as a Mennonite group we had these parties — one of them asked me for a date in the afternoon and I said I'd go, and his name was Schrag, and then when he came it wasn't Schrag, but he had a Schultz name, I think. I thought, "Oh, I didn't hear him right." So I got in the car with him, but I went with the wrong man, and as we were leaving the lane, this one came up and I realized, "I think I'm with the wrong man" [laughter]. But those were precious times in the Mennonite community, these Sunday evening parties. You learned to know people, we were together, and it really only included ... it might have included people from the Hopefield Church, but otherwise it was mostly people from the Eden Church. After church we would get together: "Where's the party?" And we would probably sing for an hour and then break up and everybody went home, no food.



HH: What year did you get married?

FG: In '44

HH: And did your husband [Roland R. Goering] become ... a pastor immediately?

FG: No, he was still in the seminary in Connecticut. He grew up only about six miles from where I grew up, and, of course, [I knew] him from church. When we were engaged, I thought he would probably be a pastor and I said, "It's fine with me, but I don't feel that I have the role of a pastor's wife." I do a lot of praying, but praying in public is a little difficult for me, and speaking ... you know you expect ministers' wives to take care of the sewing societies and all that. I'll do the work, but I'm not good at speaking, so I feel that I know my limitations.

But we got married. He was in seminary two years, and then we got married, and then I went with him the last year. ... I think his last month of school or something at the seminary he had a call, or a letter from a man, also a Goering, ... [asking] Roland if he would be willing to come to McPherson to see if there is enough interest in starting a Mennonite church. There were quite a few Mennonites that were going to Eden, but they thought there might be enough Mennonites to start a church and asked Roland to come and do that

So we went there, and that was a good experience, too. I need to get my diary out and read what all happened. We would meet in homes. There would be maybe 25 people. We would meet in a schoolhouse part of the time. It took about two years before we established a church and there, too, there's no way that these 25, 30 people could build a church, so ... the churches around ... like Eden Church, well, mostly Eden Church, came and helped build the church. It was a lovely church. We were there ten years, and there were about, a little over 100 members there. The church is still going. ... [Roland] was very, very strong on peace. Sometimes when we'd have an argument, I'd say, "Hey, where's our peace?" *[laughter]*. He wrote his sermons out word for word, and he memorized them, and when he passed away I had all these sermons, so I put all those sermons into book form ... There's about four sermons or five sermons just on peace. Yeah, it was a wonderful experience ...

HH: Well, it's all interesting. ...

FG: When we lived in Greely, California — [Roland] had a church in Greely, California — we had real close neighbors ... They had two small children. I was outside and she came, she was about six or seven years old, I think her name was Phyllis. I said, "I want to show you something," and she came, and I said, "look what God made." And she said, "Don't talk about God to me." And ran away and told her mother, and her mother was on the other side of the fence, and she said, "We're atheists, we don't believe in God." And I didn't say a word to her, I said, "Oh?" Because they were the best neighbors ... When I think of being a Christian, to me it is more than words, it goes back to works I guess. There was something about these people that was special, even before I knew they said they were atheists. Friendly, you know.

And then this last house, it was [in] the front of our house ... I took a hose and I scrubbed my porch, they came and put dirt on it. Then there would be a flower blooming, they would tear it off. If I planted something, they would dig it up, and they did it so I would see it, and then they would run back to their house and all I'd see was their head peaking out, laughing. I never said a one word to them. I got the hose, I washed the porch. When my husband passed away, we had a Sunday school class here about nine people and I was ... we were talking about how important words are, in our belief. You know, "I believe in the Lord Jesus Christ ..." you say. I said, "Well, I have to tell you the story about our neighbors, these boys that did that to me. They went to church every Sunday ..." And I'm not criticizing them, please understand me, but the mother said, "Oh, they go to Sunday school every Sunday, they are wonderful kids." And they were, but when I think of [the atheist children] compared to [the church-going children], you know ... no, I don't like to criticize people, but they couldn't believe it in Sunday School. One lady said, "You didn't reprimand them?" I said, "No." "And you didn't even say anything to them?" I said, "I didn't say one word." And they knew that I saw them, and they saw me get the hose. But I think if I had said something [like] "boys, you ought to know better than that," they probably would have done it more and more. But you know, those are experiences that are really precious to me, and I really am so happy that I didn't say anything to those boys. ...

HH: You have lots of good insights.

FG: You know I think ... even the word peace ... can mean many many different things. It might mean

different things to me as it does to somebody else. They can both mean peace. ... I guess when I think of Mennonites and peace, and maybe I'm totally wrong ... we don't believe in fighting, we want peace, that's why we don't go to war. But it probably means much more ... but that's what it means to me, being a peace church. I think there [are] only three: Church of the Brethren, Mennonites, and Quakers ... I mean [they] are listed as the historic peace churches. I'm sure there's many, many that would believe like we do. But I think when I grew up ... there was one boy in our church that went into the army and I know the minister was very, very disappointed. ...

I guess when I think of Mennonites I think of peace, no war, you don't participate in war. And when I think of Mennonites, I think they are very conscious of the help that people need. I know when this earthquake came in Japan, I knew immediately that there would be ... people [who] went there. I think there's still people in Haiti. Are you familiar with ... that Hurricane in Louisiana ... what is that called?

HH: Hurricane Katrina?

FG: Yeah, and they are still building houses. And when I think of Mennonites, I think of "we care about people." But that's true of other denominations. I don't want to leave that impression that we're the only ones because we're not the only ones, many of them do. ... There was a tornado here in Greensburg, Kansas – I think they are still there, and they build houses there, and it's all volunteer work. They're not getting anything for it. I read an article in our church paper, *The Mennonite Weekly Review*, and it said that the work that they have done in Louisiana, Katrina there ... [the] most beautiful houses and they build it so they are built up high. ... I don't want to leave the impression that the Mennonites are the only one that do that because I think every church can say that.