



A typical home of a family of peace and plenty where River Brethren dwell in
Dallas County, Iowa, 1936.

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THE QUEST OF PEACE

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Thirty-five miles northwestward from Des Moines, in Dallas County, lie broad acres of fertile Iowa land, owned and cultivated by a small group of River Brethren. This is not a communistic group, for each household and farm (ranging from one hundred sixty to four hundred acres) is a complete and separate unit, but is held in close association by bonds of blood and of faith.

From the beginning of time religion has been closely interwoven with history. There is a beautiful theory that St. Paul founded the Waldensian church on his journey to Spain. History does not conclusively prove this, but it is a matter of record that in 1170, Peter Waldo of Lyons, France, became dissatisfied with the established church and gradually acquired a large following. This new group endeavored to follow, according to their own interpretation of the New Testament, the example of the Apostles. This cardinal principle of Peter Waldo, that man should interpret the Bible in his own way, grew in strength and reached into other countries. The Anabaptists of early Reformation days may not be a branch of the Waldenses, but they were at least strongly influenced by them.

Outsiders gave this later group the name of Anabaptists (meaning rebaptizers), but they themselves never acknowledged the term, merely called themselves Brethren. The Swiss Anabaptists were at all times in opposition to the ideas of violence and insurrection of the Munsterites of Germany. Although they agreed with them on several religious tenets, they held that a Kingdom on Earth could not be set up by the sword.

During the early part of the sixteenth century many of the

peaceful Anabaptists were reorganized under the leadership of Menno Simons, a contemporary of Luther and Zwinglius. Thus the Mennonite religion came into being. From the beginning, the Mennonites have kept no records, holding it sufficient to carry their religion in their hearts; and the greater share of their written history has been by outsiders. Had it been otherwise, it is quite possible that the name of Menno Simon would rank with that of Luther, Zwinglius and others of the same magnitude produced in the Reformation.

The Mennonites stressed the importance of baptism as a sign of admission into the church, and not to infants simply because they were the seed of the faithful. This brought down the wrath of other religious denominations on their heads. They also believed in the complete separation of state and church, and in universal peace. This belief naturally included the doctrine of nonresistance and often incurred the wrath of the state.

Beginning with the year 1537 persecution of the Mennonites was cruel and relentless. In their search for religious freedom they became men without a country. In 1683 many of them accepted William Penn's invitation to settle in Pennsylvania. These first comers founded their new homes in and about Germantown. From 1709 to 1735 many families from the Palatinate, descendants of the persecuted Swiss, came to America and settled in the Pequa Valley, which later became Lancaster County (still later a part became York County), Pennsylvania.

John Nissly (first spelled Nüssli) came to Lancaster County in 1717 and Jacob Nissly was naturalized in 1729 in Mount Joy Township of the same county. Christian Wenger came on the ship James Goodwill on September 27, 1727. Johann Peter Keller did not come until about 1750.

These men and their families settled among the Conestoga, Pequa, and Shawnee Indians where under ill-omened circumstances they built their homes and improved their lands. Through the years in the details of their daily life they insisted on the strictest simplicity, yet they used the very best materials and their products were of the highest quality. In Pennsylvania, as it had been during their exile in the Netherlands, "Menist fine" was a worthy trademark and a synonym for the best that could

be obtained. In their Swiss homes these people had been small farmers and dairymen. Their new farms varied from two hundred acres to a thousand or more.

All through their history the Mennonites have been a peaceful, quiet and thrifty people. Usually they were on good terms with the Indians and they had no serious trouble with them until the French and Indian Wars from 1754 to 1763. During this period of time it was necessary for them to send to Holland for financial aid after a series of disastrous Indian raids.

But all in all they prospered and were content in their new homes until the days of the Revolution. Still retaining their doctrine of nonresistance, the Mennonites held to a policy of strict neutrality. During the early years of the War for Independence, they were exempted from active military service by payment of a money fine or by other service. After the Declaration of Independence there was some difficulty over the oath of allegiance required by each state. Many of the Mennonites refused to take the oath, but the state authorities were lenient as they knew them to be peaceable citizens and not enemies. The motives of the Mennonites in their refusal to bear arms or to take oaths, was as usual, frequently misunderstood and misconstrued. Their difficulties in regard to these matters were caused by local hot-heads and not by the government.

Jacob Engle came from Canton Basel, Switzerland, and settled near the Susquehanna River in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. A revival in 1770 conducted by Lutherans, Mennonites and Baptists resulted in numerous conversions. Differences of opinion regarding the mode of baptism arose and separate movements resulted. After the revival the Engles still held to trine immersion and those who believed with them formed the denomination known as the River Brethren.

The story goes that the original members were baptized in the Susquehanna and this might have given them the name, or because their homes were near the river the neighbors called them Brethren by the River or simply River Brethren.

In 1843, differences regarding church housekeeping arose and led to the withdrawal of the Yorker Brethren or as they prefer, the Old Order of River Brethren.

The River Brethren have no formulated creed, their religion being strictly between man and his God, and they hold to trine immersion as the true form of baptism; they retain the ordinance of foot washing in connection with their communion, and non-resistance is one of their fundamental principles. During the Civil War both the Confederate and Union governments passed active military exemption laws, imposing fines of \$200 to \$500 or more. Even so the Mennonites suffered many petty persecutions and some few major ones. By this time, the Old Order of River Brethren evidently had broadened their views of non-resistance so that they might serve their country in any way except by actual military duty.

During the Civil War Noah Nissly of Mount Joy Township, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, served in the Union Army as a bridge builder. One of his comrades was from Iowa who evidently believed in the efficacy of advertising, for shortly after the war Noah Nissly settled in Poweshiek County, Iowa. Early in 1876 John Nissly, a young unmarried man following his uncle's example, came to Iowa and bought a farm in Dallas County. He returned to Pennsylvania for what he considered a short visit. While there he married a young woman of his own faith. Shortly after the marriage ceremony the bride decided that Iowa was too far away and refused to accompany her husband to his Iowa home. What to do? Go back to Iowa without his bride? Impossible. And the farm? John's brother, Martin, came to his rescue. He rented the Iowa farm and made plans to go West.

In a nearby Pennsylvania county a young man, eldest son of a large family, decided that the West was the place for him. He asked permission to accompany Martin Nissly on his trip to the land of opportunity. Yes, his young strength was a needed factor and, too, he had been brought up in the faith.

On March 13, 1877, Martin Nissly, his wife, Mary, and a two-year-old son, Noah, together with young Henry Keller left Mount Joy. This was not a trek overland, but by rail; their first stop was at Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, and by March 16 they reached Canton, Ohio. Their journey took them through Decatur, Illinois, and by March 25 they had reached Keokuk, Iowa.

One more day and they reached Des Moines, then on to Dallas Center.

As is usual, their car of household goods was delayed and contrary to promises was transferred in Chicago. By the first of April the household goods arrived and the move to the farm made. Unfortunately the stone jars of apple butter had been turned upside down in the transfer and prized quilts and linens were stained a dull brown.

In a short time Martin Nissly was able to buy the farm and two years later Henry Keller bought a farm in the same neighborhood. In the meantime another Pennsylvania family of the River Brethren came to Dallas County. The Hawbakers (Habecker in early Pennsylvania history) joined their friends and Brethren in faith. Henry Keller married the eldest Hawbaker daughter and a new home was established, but only for a few brief years. When their young son, Jacob, was five, his mother died and the home was incomplete until years afterward Henry Keller married a younger sister of his first wife.

The busy years brought other members of the River Brethren and in the year 1883 a church was established and their first Love Feast was held. In 1885 the first baptism took place.

Today the names of their church members: Nissly (first bishop in Iowa), Keller (present bishop), Hawbaker, Wenger, Eby and others are the same names as Mennonite pioneer settlers of Pennsylvania.

The Love Feast is held annually and helps keep alive the strong bonds of blood and faith that exist between the three groups of the Old Order of River Brethren in the United States. The largest group is in and around Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, a smaller group in Ohio, and the group about Dallas Center, Iowa. This last is a group of about forty members.

The Love Feast is held in Pennsylvania during the last week of May, moving on to Ohio in the first week of June and into Iowa the second week; the day of preparation, ordinance of communion and of foot washing requiring three days in each state. Several ministers and a few of the members attend the three services held in the three states.

No church buildings are maintained and this year the Iowa

services were held at the Noah Nissly farm near Dallas Center. The second floor of the large barn had been cleared of hay and two long tables with benches of planks were set up along one side wall. The tables were for the use alone of church members. Others may witness the services, but cannot take any real part in them.

Seated around the long table at the right were the men. Leonardo da Vinci's conception of the Last Supper might easily have had its inspiration from the faces of this group. Their hair was parted in the middle and falls almost to their shoulders, although it was cut square around the back. Their beards were uncut. Instead of flowing robes the men wear dark coats with standing military or clerical collars; they wear white collars but no ties. Their hats are of black felt with a flat round-edged crown of medium height and with a two and one-half to three-inch brim.

Facing the audience, and at the end of the table, was the bishop of the Iowa congregation; next to him was the minister from Ohio, and the third was the minister from Pennsylvania. This man with his kind thoughtful eyes showing his close communion with the inner man, his true humility, and the complete tranquility of his bearing gave the impression that he was, indeed, the model for da Vinci's portrayal of the lowly Nazarene.

All day on the Friday, and again Friday night, of the second week of June, the church members held their meeting, going to their homes only long enough for the needed rest, then returning to services lasting through the entire Saturday. Sermons, testimonial services and hymn signing filled these two days. All differences, all malice must needs be cast out of the heart, for no member of the church partakes of the communion unless he is at peace with his God and his fellowmen.

The Saturday night service opened with a short testimonial service and then a hymn, followed by a sermon by the minister from Pennsylvania. He was a Hawbaker and at least distantly related to most of the Iowa congregation. His text was John 13:1-18, which is a description of the Last Supper and gives the command for the ordinance of foot washing.

Seated around the long table at the left were the women of

the church. The sweetness of expression and their serene manner is accentuated by their devotional head covering. This is a small white cap in the "Priscilla Alden" style and is always worn during services, while some of the women wear it seven days of the week.

The waist and skirt of their costume are put together with a narrow band and a short peplum; the waist is short and very plain, the skirt is long and very full. An apron and a shoulder shawl of the same material as the dress complete the costume. The cape or shoulder shawl is long enough to reach the waistline both in front and behind, and successfully conceals all lines of feminine grace and beauty. For outdoor wear they have a dark cape and a black sunbonnet with its long full cape across the back.

After the sermon from St. John, the following hymn was sung:

Behold! Our Blessed Lord
Met with his chosen band,
And said to them, in act and word,
"Keep this, my plain command."

He laid his garments by,
Upon that doleful night,
When earth and hell combined, to try
Man's only hope to blight.

Then did our humble Lord
With towel girded stand,
A basin, full of water pour'd,
Held in his sacred hand;

And lo!—he washed their feet!
And then he wiped them dry!
And taught them, thus, a lesson meet,
Of deep humility.

"Know ye what I have done?"
Said he to one and all;
"I have to you a pattern shown,—
Whom ye your Master call;

"As I have washed your feet,
To show my love for you;
Ye ought to wash each other's feet,
To show your love is true.

“The servant must not claim
To be above his Lord,”—
Then, Lord, be this my constant aim,
To keep thy sacred word.

The singing is done in a monotone or perhaps a melancholy minor describes it better. Without instrumental accompaniment, the hymn was droned out two lines at a time after the reading thereof by the bishop. The sermons are preached in a similar style. A verse, or verses, of the Bible is read and a personal interpretation is given in a flat tone with no rhetorical embellishments or emphatic gestures.

Following the hymn came the ordinance of foot washing. One man washed the feet and another dried them, taking turns as directed by a member in charge. While this ordinance was performed around the men's table a similar scene was enacted around the women's table. Each individual ceremony was sealed at each table by the kiss of peace. Immediately following this ceremony came the ordinance of communion held in commemoration of the death and suffering of Christ. Unleavened bread and the silver cup of wine is used in this ceremony and is concluded by the kiss of charity.

Sunday morning services were for the purpose of further strengthening the church members. The entire services are dignified but not formal and an atmosphere of reverence is felt that is seldom achieved in other modern Protestant churches.

It has been said that as pride enters a church the ordinance of foot washing goes out. Surely it is a perfect symbol of humility and conducive to brotherly love. One Iowa church member summarized it thus, “How could a man go out and cheat a fellowman after he had washed that man's feet?”

The following extracts are from a letter received from a member of the Iowa River Brethren congregation:

“You wondered if our doctrine of brotherly love reached the pocketbook. It does. We take care of all our poor members, and any misfortunes that our members meet with are also taken care of. No members are allowed to go heavily in debt without the consent of the membership. If they do so, they are not helped. We do not go to law either among ourselves or with others. As

a rule we do not vote. Some of us are school directors and that is as far as we go in public office. We have no divorces and may only marry a church member."

In reply to a query regarding nonresistance, they answered quickly, "We believe in it with our whole souls," and almost in the same breath they added, "But that doesn't mean we are not loyal to our government. We practice nonresistance only insofar as it does not conflict with our duty to our country."

For centuries these small groups of people and their ancestors have sought a land where they may dwell in peace, which they may cultivate, and worship their God in their own way. From Switzerland to northern Germany, then to William Penn's land and now to Iowa.

For fifty years and more they have found Iowa a land of peace and plenty. Even through the years of the depression they have not known hunger or want and have never received a penny's worth of outside help. The World War touched them but not to the extent of forcing them to move on. The youngest son of Martin Nissly was killed in France; he was serving as a cook.

The Old Order of River Brethren believe with Isaiah 2:4, "And they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more."

They do not mouth such deceptive words as "Poor misguided man, at heart he is good and noble." These direct lineal and spiritual descendants of the Swiss Anabaptists will tell you that man by his very nature is carnal. Their first command is repentance, then reformation, and they hold that the characteristic of a true believer is not his creed, but his life.

They have built up prosperous farms, dotted with horses, cattle, hogs, sheep and chickens; and operated with all the modern efficiency made possible by tractors, electricity, refrigeration plants, hard work and thrift. They are a plain people, direct of speech, and possessing a simple dignity. They have honest eyes and strong faces and a reputation for fair dealing. They hope and pray for peace, but they know they shall not find a lasting peace until as one member stated, "we are found faithful, and all can meet in that great final meeting when the nations will all

be gathered around the Great White Throne as John saw in Revelations, 7:9-17.

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RAILROAD PASSES

THANKS. We are under renewed obligations to our railroads, the B. & M., and the K., Ft. D. M. & M., for the customary passes to the press, those bits of pasteboard which are at all times so ornamental and on special occasions so useful. We avail ourselves of the opportunity to say that the presentable management of these roads, the former by H. Thielson, Esq., superintendent, William H. Northup, general agent at this end, and the latter by George Williams, Esq., superintendent, William B. Armstrong, agent here, has been noted by us with much pleasure, and it will be our study, so far as we can, to cooperate with them in advancing the future prosperity of the same and their usefulness both to stockholders and the public.—*The Ottumwa Courier*, Ottumwa, Iowa, January 8, 1862. (In the Newspaper Division of the Historical, Memorial and Art Department of Iowa, Des Moines.)

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