

The Delaware Mennonite Historical Society Newsletter



June 2003

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Nevin Bender, As We Knew Him

By Paul Bender With Titus Bender

During his teenage years Nevin Bender was known as "a hickory," according to his cousin Ezra Bender. A "hickory" in that Springs, Pennsylvania community in the early 1900's meant he was adventurous and not easily squeezed into a mold. He was also called "a sport," which meant that he enjoyed a good time and was not repressed. We, his family, have always recognized his independent spirit and have loved and admired this quality. This young "hickory" was our father. Esther, the love of his life, was our mother. Mother left us in 1967 and Dad in 1975. Yet in many ways they are both still with us.

Nevin moved from the Springs, Pennsylvania area with his parents, Valentine and Caroline Bender, and his siblings in 1914 when he was 21. He attended "normal school" and became certified to teach in the public schools where he taught until he was called to serve in the military. His refusal to participate in any way was costly. Recently while going through his papers, we came across a notice from the State Department of Public Instruction which informed him of his loss of certification for refusing military service.

After a profound spiritual experience in his mid-twenties, ordination to the ministry and being chosen for the office of bishop, he worked to promote harmony while continuing to resist being cast into a mold. He became involved in the Amish Mennonite Conference, later changed to Conservative Mennonite Conference.

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John Ruth, Key Note Speaker

Second Annual Banquet

Saturday, September 6, 2003

John Ruth, Franconia Conference minister, musician, writer, film maker, teacher and tour guide will be the featured speaker at our second annual Delaware Mennonite Historical Society Banquet. He will do a slide presentation and informative talk titled: [A Visit to our Swiss and German Beginnings.](#)

John Landis Ruth, born near Harleysville, PA, in 1930, was ordained a Mennonite minister in the Franconia Conference in 1950. A graduate of Lancaster Mennonite High School and Eastern Baptist College, he concluded his studies at Harvard University with a doctoral thesis on the topic of American hymnody of 1630-1800. After more than a decade of teaching English at Eastern College and the University of Hamburg, Germany, he accepted the invitation of Franconia Conference leaders to work on themes of the Mennonite spiritual heritage.

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Nevin Bender *(continued)*

In addition to serving in the Conservative Conference, he was frequently called to preach in the broader Mennonite church, particularly in the eastern US and in Ontario, Canada. Though he was conservative at heart and worked diligently to foster behavior and positions that would help the church maintain its witness in the community, he was open and accepting of those with differing opinions.

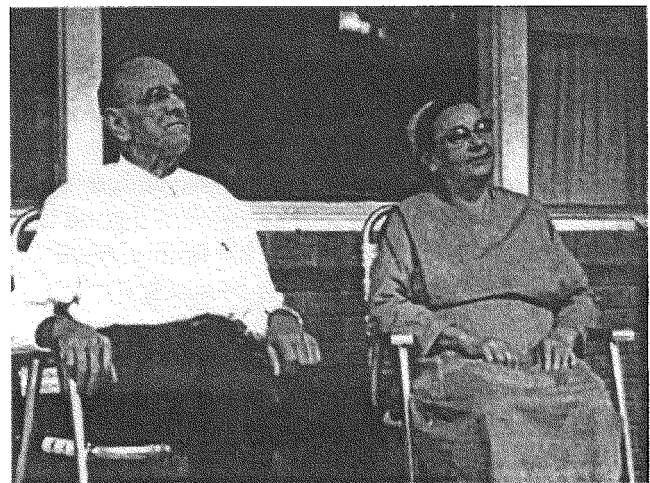
As his oldest son I occasionally traveled with him to weekend meetings. As we traveled, I learned first hand his concerns for the church as well as his respect for others whose views were more inclusive. As a youth growing up in the Greenwood community, my experiences were very positive.

It seems incredible that persons converging on Greenwood from many different places with differing expectations could achieve the kind of "community" that I experienced and took for granted as a young person. Consider that many persons were attempting to escape conflicts and restrictions in their previous communities. All were looking for a kind of paradise, a place where their views and values were accepted and shared, a difficult task at best. For many it came close to their ideal. But for others it was a real stretch to be part of this experiment in community. For Nevin and Esther Bender it was a growing and mainly rewarding experience despite the conflicts that surfaced in the Greenwood church as well as within the Conservative conference.

In the early 1960's Nevin retired from his bishop and ministerial duties at Greenwood. About that time a unique and exciting opportunity of service presented itself among the Choctaw Indians in Mississippi. Nevin's sense of servanthood to the down trodden, his adventuresome spirit, along

with Esther's love and devotion led them to a rare opportunity to serve in their senior years.

For Nevin and Esther Bender, leaving their home community in the early 60s for a call to serve in Mississippi led to a considerable enlargement of their church family. Even though they missed their family and friends in Greenwood, this God-directed move provided them with an enlarged church family and immeasurable rewards.



Nevin and Ester Bender

Tribute to Dad

By Donald Bender

I would like to focus on four of Dad's qualities as they expressed themselves in our family. You will recognize them as qualities which guided his public life as well. (1) Dad was optimistic and playful. He had a zest for life, even the ordinary. We heard stories about his wild motorcycle rides from his former passengers. We remember his playfulness at the occasional afternoon visit to the beach, or diving off the high dive at the Denton pool or standing on his head. I particularly remember when he and mother spent a week at the shore after his ulcer operation in

1952. Their faces were glowing with delight and exhilaration when we visited there after they had been there a week. Since this excitement contrasted sharply with the heaviness with which he returned from some difficult minister's meetings, I have wished that Dad could have spent more time at the beach.

We remember his love for good food and his favorite, oyster stew. This ordinary meal became extraordinary. Now enjoying oyster stew as a family has become an occasion for celebration and remembering.

(2) A second quality was that Dad believed in education and was open-minded. This was particularly unusual for his time and community. Dad did not presume that he had discovered all the truth that there was to know. He took teacher training and he encouraged his children, with no distinction as to whether they were sons or daughters, to pursue education. Even with money being tight, a way was found for all of us to pursue the education we chose.

With his open mindedness, Dad became a seasoned, wiser man as he matured. He often remarked that he couldn't believe how rigid he had been as a young minister. He believed in his children and in young people generally, and respected their new ideas. He continued to grow as an older man in his 70's and into his 80's. During his time in Beirut, he attended theology classes, and also came to respect people of the Muslim faith as more than potential converts to Christianity. He never stopped his openness and growth.

(3) The third quality of Dad's was that he was a gentleman. He deeply respected his mother, his wife and companion, his sisters and daughters at least as much as the men in his life. He sought their counsel because he thought, wisely in my opinion, that they had an important counseling, nurturing perspective, which was an antidote to the more competitive, authoritarian role more accepted for males. When I would ask him for

counsel as a teen-ager, what I got was counsel, not a decree.

Although Dad was a gentle man, (4) He was also a man of strength, courage and adventure. He was our Rock of Gibraltar. He knew who he was, where he stood and he stood straight. He taught that respecting all people, including those shunned by society, was more important than perceived success. But more importantly, he modeled public behavior of strength for us to follow.

Nevin was drafted into the United States Army during the summer of 1918 shortly after his ordination to the ministry and long before there was any alternative service for conscientious objectors. His experiences at Camp Meade, Maryland tested his character and faith.

The outcome of this testing in later years gave him the inner strength for the founding of the Mennonite school, leading the church in Greenwood and serving the Choctaws in Mississippi, where in a spirit of adventure, he and mother made home out of a three room tenant farmer shack, without running water.



A Wedding Portrait

His spirit of courage carried him through several church bombings; the extremists' attempts to frighten them away. Diplomacy was always his approach, but forthrightness and strength were called for in facing the exploitation of Native Americans. His identification with the Choctaw Nation prompted them to claim him as one of their own by adopting him, posthumously, as an honorary member of their tribe.

I see this strength and courage in my brothers and sisters. I am so proud of each of them. Dad and Mother taught us by word and example, that we should accept each other as a family, even when we didn't have the same perspective on an issue, and sometimes we do not. That example is worth more than an inheritance of millions. It is Dad's and Mother's greatest gift to us; the gift of each other and of the embracing of our differences, and the gift of being inspired to live out their inclusive spirit, without the loss of one.

Dad and Mother were a team. She was his rock of strength and we saw his vulnerability increase when she was gone. But when he took the trip to Beirut alone, a trip he and Mother had intended to take together, he processed his grief in frequent walks along the Mediterranean Sea. The sea once again offered its healing touch, its sound with an inward message, its pulse, the heartbeat of God. Later he returned to Greenwood, a place of many bittersweet memories and with a heart of love and grace he lived his final years here in this community.

DMHS Board Members

Vernon Zehr, President
Paul Bender, Vice President
Rachel Schlabach, Secretary/Treasurer
Truman Schrock, Legal
Harold Huber, Consultant
Dean Swartzentruber, Public Relations
Harvey Mast, Artifacts

Children of Nevin and Esther Bender 1961

(As shown below from Back Left to Right)

- Don** married to Judy Harak and live in Atlanta, Georgia
- Miriam** married to Elmer Jantzi, live in Irwin, Ohio.
- Paul** married to Virginia Riehl and live in Dover, Delaware.
- Hilda** married to Merlin Swartz and live in Bedford, Massachusetts.
- Nevin** married to Lourene Godshall and live in Harrisonburg, Virginia.
- Lura** married to Millard Benner, live on the home place at Greenwood, Delaware. (Location of the Bender House)
- Titus** married to Ann Yoder and live in Fort Defiance, Virginia.
- Mildred** lives in Mt. Rainier, Maryland
- Emma** married to Glen Myers and live in Philadelphia, Mississippi (Near the church where Nevin and Esther served.)



John Ruth *(continued)*

In line with this John has written books such as *Conrad Grebel, Son of Zurich*, (1974); *'Twas Seeding Time: A Mennonite View of the American Revolution* (1976); *Maintaining the Right Fellowship*, history of the Franconia and Eastern District Conferences (1984); *The Earth is the Lord's*, history of the Lancaster Mennonite conference, (2001). His films and videos include: *The Amish: A People of Preservation*; and *The Hutterites: To Care and Not to Care*.

From 1972 until 1993 he served as an associate pastor at the Salford Mennonite Church a mile from his home. Since 1973 he has worked with as commentator on Mennonite heritage tours in Europe. You will not want to miss this historic opportunity to meet and hear a Mennonite historian with this background and experience.

Special OPEN Board Meeting

7:00 PM July 21, 2003

There will be a special meeting of the Delaware Mennonite Historical Society Board of Directors July 21, 2003 at 7:00 PM.--OPEN TO ALL Interested members. We will meet in a classroom at the Greenwood Mennonite School. DMHS is facing some decisions in the area of growth and development and some important decisions need to be made.

Since the discussion may not be of general interest to the total membership we have called this meeting to discuss the behind the scenes activity of a hard working board. By doing this we can reserve our time for inspiration and fellowship at our annual meeting in September.

This meeting will have three important purposes. It will give you an idea of the workings of your Board and will provide an opportunity for you to give your ideas.

Your input is always valued as decisions are made. And most of all this meeting may inspire you to consider serving on the DMHS Board sometime in the future. We hope you can join us in this time of discussion for the future of DMHS.

Membership Update

The existence of DMHS depends upon its membership. The budget depends upon the dues and contributions of the members. At present our dues are \$15.00 annually. Currently we have 89 members. Eleven of these are life time members which indicates a contribution to the endowment fund. (The interest from the endowment fund assures income in perpetuity for the operation of DMHS.) We have a mailing list of 692 which includes the 89 members. At this point we are certain that there are many on the mailing list who would like to become members. We encourage you to send in you \$15.00 membership dues and join in this effort to preserve our history.

Second Annual Banquet

To Be Held September 6, 2003

The Delaware Mennonite Historical Society will hold its second annual banquet at the Greenwood Mennonite School Saturday, September 6, 2003, at 6:00 PM. While there is no charge for this annual dinner meeting you will need a reservation. Contact any of the Board Members for your reservation. The cost of the dinner is being underwritten by local businesses. An offering will be taken for the general operating cost of DMHS.

John Ruth, Mennonite writer, and minister from the Franconia Conference will be our guest speaker. See the article about John on the front page.

Going for the Bronze

By Vernon Zehr

A soft spoken woman of Korean heritage, but a proud American was excitedly explaining her purpose in going back to play table tennis in the Olympics being held in her homeland.

'I am going for the bronze', she said without apology. It was strange to hear someone admit that she wasn't good enough to be best or even second best. 'Others may brag about being the best. Many may talk with blustery confidence about winning the top prize but me, I'm just aiming for the bronze.'

The Delaware Mennonite Historical Society Newsletter is aiming for the gold. It is our unofficial editorial policy to aim high. In order to do that a number of qualities and talents are needed. We need people who are talented writers, thoughtful editors, excellent proofreaders, graphic artists, layout specialists and willing assistants. We also need to remember the broad spectrum of people we write for, as well as the message of history we wish to convey.

The articles written by Paul and Don Bender in collaboration with their brother Titus are testimony to this gold standard. The speaker we have for this September attests to this as well. Your continuing support is needed to 'lay aside any hindrances and to run the race with patience and persistence.' For whether it is the hundred yard dash, a game of ping-pong, or an interesting newsletter, we owe it to ourselves and our constituents to go for the gold.

We are realistic enough to know that aspiring for the gold does not guarantee that it will be reached. Yet, how will we know if we don't try? How will we achieve the best if we don't aim for the best. If Joshua were saying it, he would most likely proclaim, 'You may go for the bronze, or the silver, but as for me and my team—we're going for the gold.'

Although we, whom you have entrusted with producing this Newsletter, have the final say, you do have the privilege of writing something for a future Newsletter. You also have the opportunity to offer ideas that will give the impetus to DMHS to sprint to the finish line, not third, not second, but first. We are going for the gold.



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