

HISTORY AND RATIONALE

The former Pacific Coast Conference and its successor, Pacific Northwest Mennonite Conference (PNMC), has been interested in preserving its history from early days.

In 1921, at the first conference session following the Amish Mennonite-Mennonite merger, we find the following action: "That we have the manuscript for the church history of the Pacific Coast Conference district, compiled by S. G. Shetler, completed and published, and that there be a church history committee appointed, to have this done." The three-man committee was appointed: Chris Snyder, Albert Erb and Nick Leichty.

This committee, personnel of which changed from time to time, oversaw the writing, editing and publishing of the book which finally appeared in 1931 or 1932. (The book was not copyrighted, hence exact date of publication has been forgotten.) The Committee was retained for several years to promote the sale of the book, which was slow because of the depression years.

By 1938 the Committee was reduced to one person, Urie Kenagy, who was to oversee disposition of the remainder of the books. That was the same year he was given permission to take offerings (in the congregations) for the building of an archives. So far as the records tell, nothing was done along that line until the new administration building (on the Western Mennonite School campus) was built and included a small vault, one wall of which was designated as the Conference Archives.

Urie Kenagy was designated as Conference Historian in 1939. The first mention of a report being given to conference was in 1941 but no name is attached to the report. That was the year conference was to appoint a Custodian to "collect and properly preserve records and other literature of historical value to this conference district."

In 1944, conference appointed Urie Kenagy as custodian "of valuable historical literature and records" and "he [was to] continue indefinitely in this office."

It was also during this time that conference was concerned with the issues accompanying World War II and the postwar boom of new institutions (schools and homes for the aged). Historical records and archives surely took a back burner. Not until 1960 does the subject again surface in a conference session. That year there was an appeal for the "appointment of a conference historian to take the place of Urie Kenagy."

Paul E. Yoder was that person. He took seriously his task and we have two of his written reports to conference. It was during his tenure that the space in the vault became available and in his final report he said that metal shelving had been purchased and installed in the vault. In December 1965 the Conference Executive Committee had decided the archives should be in a central location and, with continued approval of the Western Mennonite School Board, Western Mennonite School (WMS) should be that place.

Paul encouraged individuals and congregations to send information of value to the archives, including copies of church bulletins. He was pleased with the response in general, but disappointed that more personal collections were not forthcoming at the time. Enough materials were collected so that during the time of Daniel Widmer's tenure (1968-1974) the space was filled and after notifying congregations about the situation, some of the church bulletins not reclaimed were disposed of.

In 1974 Hope Lind became conference historian. One of her early projects was to organize and inventory the archival materials in the vault. She found a somewhat jumbled mess and also noted that the school tended to use any unused space for their purposes. Many of the items the school had stored in the vault seemed out of place in such an area: athletic equipment, sports cards, etc. Obviously, sharing this small space was unsatisfactory and fraught with problems.

As plans were underway for the chapel/conference center building on campus, they included space for an archives and historical library. Early plans allowed 400 sq. ft. for that purpose. The final product is a room of 385 sq. ft. This space was full almost as soon as it was occupied. Not all space is used to store archival materials and shelve books of the historical library. Some is used for working space, file cabinets, a copy machine and a computer. The 400 sq. ft. was supposed to be adequate for 15 to 20 years, but isn't.

As plans and finally construction were underway for the new chapel building, Hope Lind envisioned a historical and genealogical society for the area that would encourage preservation of materials and encourage research. In keeping with this vision, the Oregon Mennonite Historical and Genealogical Society (OMHGS) became a reality in late 1988 and now exists as a tax-exempt nonprofit corporation under State of Oregon laws.

In 1989 Hope recommended for conference delegate action the following:
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The elected conference historian [should] be included as a member of the OMHGS governing board, as an additional member unless that person is already serving in an OMHGS elective position; and that PCC request that OMHGS organize, administer and operate the archives and historical library and that it be the custodian of present archival materials." Conference approved this action. In the 1995 session of the newly organized PNMC, this same action was reaffirmed.

The present archives/library space became available in spring 1991. Boxes of archival materials were brought from the vault; books were moved from the school library storage shelves. Other books and materials were brought from the home of Alfred and Marjorie Nofziger. Marjorie was our first librarian and had willingly stored things for OMHGS.

In the ten (plus) years since the present space became available, the majority of these materials have been processed; i.e., archival materials sorted, inventoried, cataloged and placed in acid-free file folders and archival boxes. Books have been cataloged and shelved and many additional books have been donated or purchased. Likewise, much additional archival material has come in and been processed.

Library holdings number about 1500 books and pamphlets in addition to a nice collection of periodicals. To arrange the library holdings to be most convenient for users, we could use all the available space.

The archival materials now available consist of 37 personal collections (some only one small box, others, ten or more large boxes); collections from more than a dozen congregations (some of these are large); almost complete Pacific Coast Conference records; a nice collection of Pacific District of the General Conference Church records; Western Mennonite School records; and others such as records of institutions, camping programs, Civilian Public Service and Civilian Peace Service. There is much more we would like to make available for research and education. Like the library materials, archival materials could easily take up all the present space. So far we are having to compress the two collections into the one space and it becomes difficult. We have no additional storage space. At times it is difficult to use volunteer help adequately for lack of somewhere to work.

Our resources are used some by researchers. These resources are a welcome source of information to conference executives who have questions that need answers from time to time. We do not advertise ourselves or go out of our way to

encourage use of the materials because of our severe space limitations. This we would like to see changed. Besides being available to folks in the area, we would like to be more available to students at WMS and elsewhere, and to family or church history researchers from afar. Hope Lind's materials she accumulated and used in the process of writing the story of Oregon Mennonites from 1876 to 1976 are part of our collection. Sometime the story of both the Pacific Coast conference and the Pacific District conference of the General Conference Mennonites need to be written in detail, and where better to find the information to do both? Likewise the Mennonite Brethren and other related groups need their stories told.

Materials from the PNMC are being sent to the archives where they are being stored and as soon as space and time are available, they will be processed so as to be readily available when needed.

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