

Melanie Springer Mock
PNMHS Fall Meeting Notes

History in the Kitchen

The many thousands of meals my mother made during my childhood exist now in a mostly-hazy idyll: our family gathered in the parsonage's bright kitchen, cocooned by Kansas's darkest winter, eating soup and homemade bread; or later, when we lived in Oregon, the late summer dusk warming us as we ate Rollkuchen on our deck. My mom was—is—a great cook, and although I can't recall what she made throughout my childhood, I remember her cooking as wholesome, tasty, and taken for granted by her family.

Only one meal remains especially vivid in my mind, its memory neither hazy nor idyllic, its construction only wholesome, *not* tasty. Our family had moved from a Mennonite Mecca in Kansas, where even the school cafeteria served Bierrocks and Vareniky; to the Oregon Diaspora, where people confused Mennonites with Mormons, and even my church peers didn't know Pluma Moos from Jell-O salad. Yet when I invited a new high school friend for dinner, I hadn't considered a possible cultural clash. Of course, my parents embarrassed me; my dad's career as a pastor and the badly sewn clothes my mom made me were a constant shame. But I figured one meal seemed harmless—until mom put a *More-With-Less Cookbook* mainstay on the table, assuring adolescent mortification.

The meal was a Savory Baked Lima dish (page 105 of *More-With-Less*). I imagine my mom served other popular *More-With-Less* items with the bean bake: perhaps oatmeal bread or cinnamon/raisin muffins, or maybe even Elise's Fruit Cobbler, an acceptable dessert low in sugar, high in fiber. I recall only that bean bake, the big lima beans swimming in a yellow casserole dish. Scooping a small

spoonful on my friend's plate, I apologized; and while my friend swore she liked the casserole, I knew she was lying, and that my family would be forever labeled odd for serving strange (but healthy!) fare.

In many ways, this *More-With-Less* story exemplifies the relationship I had with my mother and with my Mennonite identity. Longacre's *More-with-Less* cookbook is also emblematic for me of my mother and her familial role: as nurturer, for she cooked our meals and met our needs; as financial watchdog, for she compelled our family to live simply; and as conduit of Mennonite traditions, for her own ties to ethnic Mennonites defined our family's Mennonite identity, not my father's much-later conversion.

In this, I am not unlike many Mennonites, for whom food is intricately tied to ethnic and even religious identity. Indeed, scholars are increasingly recognizing the importance of food in understanding culture, and thus in understanding a people group's history. For this reason, historians are spending more time looking at how Mennonite domesticity—its foods, cookbooks, and in-home practices—reflect changes in the North American Mennonite church at large.

In *Mennonite Women in Canada: A History*, Marlene Epp writes about Mennonite cookbooks, arguing that “Cookbooks, initiated and produced by women, shaped both Mennonite cultural understanding and generated external perceptions and knowledge about Mennonite historical development and sociological identity.”

Historians often write about the larger movements that help to define a nation or a people group: wars, elections, the activities of powerful leaders. But, just as often, the seeming minutia of life can give us clues to history and to what was important to a certain people, in a certain time.

So today, at our fall meeting, we are going to talk about food. Our presentation this afternoon differs in many ways from those we've had in the past, in great part because we are having more than one presenter, and in part because these presenters will be sharing stories more personal in nature, though I'm a firm believer in the power of personal narratives to reflect larger movements in history. In some ways, it will be up to you, the listener, to think about how the

stories connect to Mennonite faith, identity, and history. After we hear from several people, there will hopefully be time to talk about these connections, and also how your own memories about food reflect the Mennonite world you were raised in.

Our first presenter today will be joining us via video. Shirley Showalter, president of Goshen College from 1997-2004, will be reading from her excellent memoir, *Blush*, due out this month. Shirley's upbringing was as a conservative Mennonite in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and her memoir details the ways she was nurtured and challenged by this environment. In a chapter on "The Seven Sweets and Seven Sours," Shirley writes about the ways Mennonite food traditions of her () heritage reflected the place and time in which she lived. I'm grateful that Shirley was willing to share her story via video with us:

Shirley Showalter Video

Our next presenter is Jerry Barkman, current president of the Pacific Northwest Mennonite Historical Society. Jerry will also share from the perspective of a Mennonite whose () ethnicity reflects his memories about food and culture.

Jerry Barkman Presentation

For both Shirley and Jerry, food reflects their Mennonite ethnicities, their culture, and thus their histories as Mennonites coming of age in the 1950s and 1960s, when the *Mennonite Community Cookbook*, family recipes, and even congregational cookbooks reflected the more insular and separatist nature of Mennonites, the deep denominational roots with a European past.

As Mennonites moved into the latter part of the 20th century, however, the denomination began to change. Mennonites were losing their primarily rural identities. They were moving into cities, and dispersing from the insular communities in which they were raised. They were becoming more invested in the world around them. You can see this shift clearly in a cookbook like the

quintessentially Mennonite *More-With-Less*, first published by Herald Press in 1976. In many ways, Doris Longacre's text marked a transformation occurring in the Mennonite church at large, the book's pages reflecting the denominational shifts rocking the church.

The *More-with-Less* also holds in tension the paradox facing Mennonites in the late 20th century. The cookbook reaches into the past, and into the deep roots of traditional Mennonite faith and praxis, while also looking to the future, and to the assimilated identity many Mennonites were assuming.

Louise Newswanger, now a retired college librarian, was raising her children during the 1970s, when the *More-With-Less* was published. It became one of the books she used to feed her family, and although it offered some recipes for traditional Mennonite foods like Pluma Moos and Bierrock, it was groundbreaking for Mennonites because it included international cuisine and tips on how to cook healthy, low-cost meals, and thus provided a challenge to Mennonites to attend more to the world around them as a witness to their faith. Louise is going to share a little about her experience with the *More-With-Less*.

Louise Newswanger

In the years after Doris Longacre's wildly successful book (now in its ___ printing, with ___ copies sold), other world community cookbooks, published through MCC and marketed primarily to Mennonites, also emerged, continuing and expanding the ideology presented by *More-With-Less*. Notice the echo in its title alone: from the *Mennonite Community Cookbook* of the 1950s to a much broader, *World Community* reach. These cookbooks reflected the widening scope of Mennonites—their intensified longing to be working in the world, connecting with people of many different cultures. But these world cookbooks also reflected the expanded reach of Mennonitism. Mennonites are no longer just European descendants, dining on borscht and verinky. Mennonites are Vietnamese eating Pho for breakfast; and Ghanans enjoying Groundnut Stew; and Colombians, serving

_____ to their families.

Catherine Hockman-Wirt of Corvallis is intimately familiar with the World Community Cookbooks, serving as editor for *Simply in Season*. She will now share a little about her experience with the book, and how working on this project has shaped her own understanding of Mennonitism, while also reflecting shifting concerns in the Mennonite church itself.

Catherine Hockman-Wert

As we well know, conversations among Mennonites continue to revolve around what it means to be Mennonite in an ever-changing era, when church membership is growing fastest in the global south, when Mennonites are increasingly urban, and when many join the Mennonite church from other faith traditions. What does it mean now to be Mennonite? And how do those who aren't connected to Mennonites by ethnicity—who can't play the Mennonite game well—still find their place at the table? We will end today's discussion by hearing from a Mennonite who came to the church as an adult, and who has sometimes felt an outsider because of her lack of connection through Mennonite ethnicity. Judy Bacher of Albany will share how discussions about Mennonite food themselves have sometimes made Judy feel like an outsider, and how her own experiences might be instructive in helping us understand where Mennonites have been—and where they are going.

Judy Bacher

I'm grateful for everyone's willingness to share their stories, for even these personal stories reflect larger historical and cultural movements. Although many of us have complex relationships with food, and though our quickened society means we often eat meals on the go, in our cars or over the sink or at our work desks, there's something still about meals that ties us together, allowing us to fellowship

together as friends, as family, as Mennonites, as brothers and sisters in Christ. So, before we disperse to commune over the food we've brought to share, we'd like to take a few minutes for others to share their memories about Mennonite food, however you choose to understand Mennonites.