

# at the crossroads: a faith is shaped

*In every journey of faith and conscience, there is a point – a crossroads – when a decision is made that permanently alters the remainder of the journey. For the Old Order Mennonites, this point occurred in 1900 through the leadership of Israel Rohrer.*

Actually, there were two Israel Rohrers, father and son, and both deeply believed in the heritage that is now embodied by the Old Order Mennonites. The elder Rohrer was an entrepreneurial miller in Pennsylvania. Sadly, he and his wife, Anna Hess Rohrer, buried eight of their children; also, his fortune shifted due to changes in the market price for grain. These events prompted the family to move to Virginia in 1876. Although the elder Israel died in 1894, six years before the Old Order Mennonites organized as a separate group in Virginia, he had already outlined their basic beliefs. His son, Israel Hess Rohrer, continued that role.

As the name suggests, Old Order members value their heritage. During the late 1800s more progressive Mennonites began experimenting with religious innovations such as revival meetings and Sunday schools. The older Israel responded that numbers did not guarantee faithfulness. Glamorous reports of dramatic conversions were tempered for him by concerns for enduring change and faithful commitment in people's lives. Today, Old Order Mennonites continue to emphasize the importance of the individual becoming part of the church as the community of faith.

The progressive Mennonite John S. Coffman acknowledged Israel's concerns. In letters from Indiana to ministers back in his native Virginia, Coffman called for "Mennonite" revivals as opposed to "Methodist" ones. He explained how he was careful to avoid emotional appeals and ask persons in his audiences to consider the cost carefully before responding. Israel Rohrer found Coffman unconvincing and continued to draw the line on "worldly religion and emotionalism" by avoiding revivals. His views were in keeping with those Brethren and Mennonites who long suspected "protracted meetings" held on continuous nights in the same location of not producing genuine spiritual fruit.

Both Israel Rohrers also rejected the Sunday school. The father warned that reliance upon such human innovations would replace faith in God. "We must trust to Him for the prosperity of the church," he pleaded, "for He has promised that He will never leave us or forsake us. The Sunday school is an institution that originated with the worldly churches." His voice might quiver, but he did not mince words, noting that John F. Funk's promotion of Dwight L. Moody-like innovations grew out of his having spent time in "that Babel city, Chicago." Sunday schools were usually established under lay leadership, challenging traditional ministerial authority, and implying the need for institutions other than the family or church. On both of these counts, the concept of Sunday school strained what would become enduring Old Order values.

By 1900, when Old Order Mennonites in Virginia organized (the name means holding to the old order style of worship service), similar groups already existed in Indiana, Ontario and Pennsylvania. Son Israel Hess Rohrer continued to promote respect for heritage in assessing change. Rejection of automobiles during the 1920s made the horse and buggy a distinguishing mark of

## CHRONICLES

THE QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER OF THE VALLEY BRETHREN-MENNONITE HERITAGE CENTER

WINTER 2004 VOL II NO. 4



Pleasant View Old Order Mennonite Church

the Old Order's deep commitment to values the two Israel Rohrers articulated. Theirs was a community of faith marked by a lifestyle discerned and maintained as an alternative to the consuming impulses of materialism and individualism in the surrounding culture.

Today, Old Order Mennonites in Rockingham County and surrounding areas continue in the beliefs affirmed during the late 1800s and early 1900s by the two Israel Rohrers and by others in leadership roles. To them, the important values are family and church, and ultimately, faithfulness to God. Automobiles, Sunday schools, television and other characteristics of today's American culture are not found in Old Order Mennonite homes or churches. Instead, these "modern conveniences" are rejected as elements that separate families and the church community by taking attention away from the values that matter most. Currently, the two Old Order groups in Shenandoah's West Valley have about 775 baptized adult members.

### Christmas gift suggestions

*Some needs for your family, Sunday school class or congregation to consider as a Christmas project to help prepare the Welcome Center for visitors:*

- Folding chairs – \$50 each*
- Folding tables – \$100 each*
- Microwave – \$200*
- Mini-refrigerator – \$300*
- VCR to show new video – \$400*
- Shrubbery – \$1,000*
- Entrance sign – \$2,000*

### Yes, I/we want to be a member of the CrossRoads Vision . . .

- Seeker \$25    Believer \$100    Follower \$250    Disciple \$1000

*My first-year membership gift is enclosed. Please send my*  video  DVD

*Enclosed is my Christmas gift of \$ \_\_\_\_\_ in support of the CrossRoads mission.*

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip Code \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone \_\_\_\_\_ Email \_\_\_\_\_

*Please mail your gift to CrossRoads, P. O. Box 1563, Harrisonburg, VA 22803*

### FROM THE DIRECTOR'S DESK

*Some day everyone will associate molasses with CrossRoads. It will be as commonplace as Girl Scout cookies and Rockingham County turkeys. In October we held our very first annual Harvest Day, and the featured attraction was the making of molasses from our field of sorghum.*

*I'm told no one makes molasses any more around here. But a few people remember how it was done. One of them is Edna Martin. A few days before Harvest Day, she brought a few relatives along to show the rest of us how to make molasses the old-fashioned way. A few of our CrossRoads volunteers are quick learners, and they will now be able to carry on the tradition.*

*The glorious fall day—and the fun that we all had—inspired Edna to write a poem. "The rollers start turning, the stalks are pushed in, juice starts to flow," she wrote. "[Molasses is] old-fashioned goodness, used to cook and bake."*

*Twice now—for the Burkholder-Myers House dedication in 2003 and Harvest Day in 2004—we have hosted large crowds on the CrossRoads campus. The next big public event will be the opening of the Welcome Center in the spring.*

*"Welcome Center" will be the new name for the Landes House that is located along the CrossRoads lane and below the historic Burkholder-Myers House. Carpenters will begin renovating the house after Christmas. Finally, we will be able to host the public on a daily basis. Maybe Edna Martin will be inspired to write another poem!*



*Steve Shenk*

Steve Shenk, Executive Director

### Historian affirms vision

Dr. Donald F. Durnbaugh, a Church of the Brethren scholar, teacher, writer and archivist at Juniata (Pa.) College, addressed 75 guests Saturday, September 25, in the Harrisonburg Mennonite Church and affirmed the spirit of cooperation he discovered in the CrossRoads vision. A copy of his address is available from CrossRoads for \$3.

The meeting also launched a new Membership Plan in support of the CrossRoads mission. Over 100 households have signed on as members.