METAMORA ASSOCIATION FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION

NEWSLETTER

December 2022

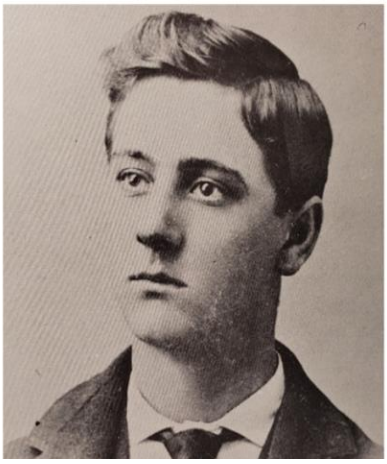
To Promote and Preserve Metamora's History
Metamora Association for Historic Preservation
Chartered Sept. 21, 2000
Illinois

Visit our **Website at**
www.historicmetamora.com

Like us on Facebook (Ctrl+click here)

MENNONITE COUNTRY BOY

BACKGROUND: C. Henry Smith was born in 1875, son of John and Magdalena Schertz Smith on the farm that is now occupied by the Darrel Bachman family 3 miles east of Metamora on Route 116*.



C. Henry Smith

A serious student and historian, Henry became one of – maybe *the* -foremost national authorities on the Mennonite Church in America. One of his books, *Mennonite County Boy*, details growing up on a rural Metamora farm in the late 1800's. It is an absolutely fascinating – and often humorous - account of what life was like. If your ancestors grew up during this period, we thought you might enjoy summary of some of the more interesting highlights. Here we go…

GRANDPARENTS. Henry's grandparents came from Alsace Lorraine and settled in the Amish-Mennonite community of what is now Metamora in 1833.

PARENTS. C. Henry's parents were John and Magdalene Schertz Smith. John was the only son and had several sisters. Magdalene had several siblings.

John and Magdalene Smith – Parents

THE HOME PLACE. Henry was born 3 miles east of Metamora on the farm that is owned by Darryl Bachman today. The original house has been replaced by the large brick home on Route 116. The picture above is the home Henry grew up in.

WHO WE WERE. "Most of the children in our district where of Swiss and German stock although American born and for the most part of American Born Heritage. One family was Irish. The rest were "Yankees," although none of them came from New England. No matter, however, from what part of the world their parents or grandparents came, the children were all typical Americans, not conscious of any divided loyalty. All spoke the English language equally well; all studied a common history and the same literature; and all shared common ideals of political democracy and civil liberty. Public school, after all, is still the greatest force in American life, and the strongest supporter of our Democratic Society. This does not mean, of course that there was no sense of group consciousness among the Dutch (Mennonites) and Yankees. They differ in customs and practices as well as in social ideals. The Yankees were more shiftless than the Dutch. They possess less land and had smaller families. The Dutch had a passion for cleanliness, fine horses, and large barns; they were noted for their industry and finally bought out there less thrifty Yankee neighbors, who followed the setting sun to cheaper lands and, no doubt, supposedly more congenial companionship. These latter, because they could speak only one language, thought themselves pure or Americans; while the former, owners of larger farms and more stock, thought these older Americans, many of whom sent their boys to college, rather shiftless and lazy."

OTHER METAMORA RESIDENTS. "By no means without interest to me were the contacts made with some of the village characters during my high school days. The original New England stock in the village (Metamora) was gradually being replaced by the descendants

of the more recent German immigrants who had located all about the countryside. These latter were usually regarded as more industrious and prosperous than the "Yankees" but with less of American social and intellectual culture."

HENRY'S UNCLE WAS CHRIS CAMP. (Chris owned the farm approximately where the Mennonite Church east of town now stands.)

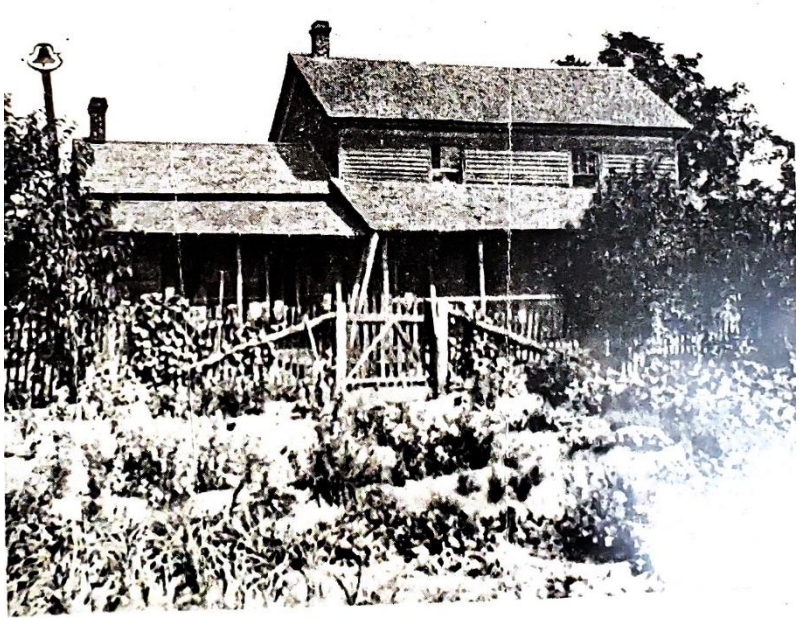
ON SATURDAY NIGHT MY BROTHER SAM AND I WOULD MAKE OUR ANNUAL VISIT TO OUR UNCLE PETER SUMMER'S HOUSE, "which was six or seven miles away near Washington. Uncle Peter was a good entertainer and his wife Bena was a good cook. Two of their boys, George and John, were about our ages and boon companions. The visit was a half day relief from manure hauling and weed pulling."

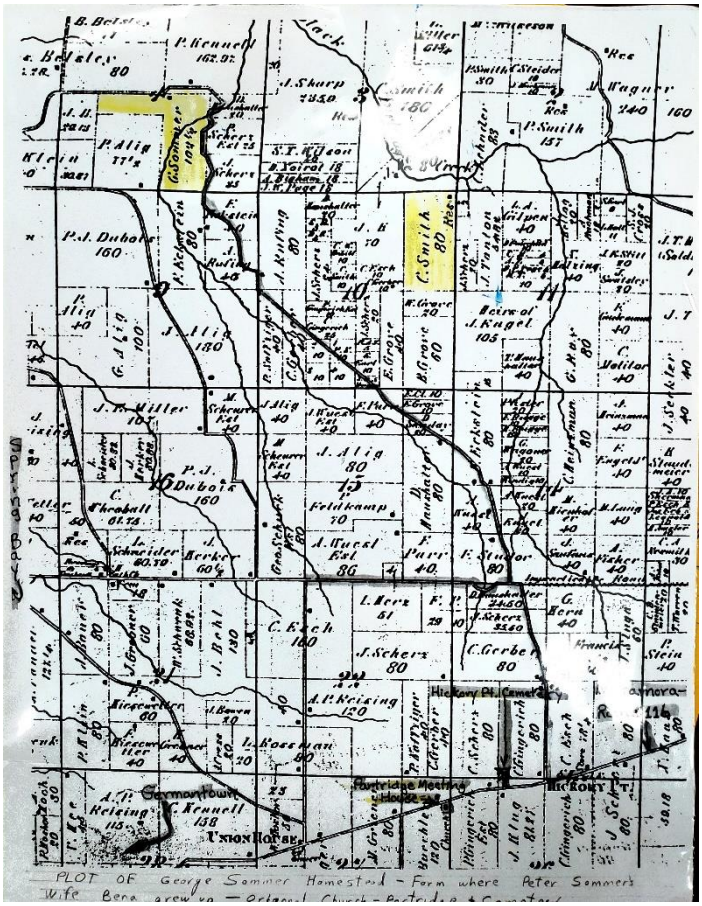
*The April 2016 MAHP Newsletter features a picture of Henry's home (which was later replaced by the current brick home) and neighbors gathered around a thrashing machine. Sue Mischler provided the picture and Bob and Julie Schertz supplied some background details. You can still find the newsletter on our website.

THRASHERS WERE A LEAP IN TECHNOLOGY. Steam thrashing machines thrashed for several adjacent farms. The new steam technology fascinated the young farmers as almost as much as Christmas Eve. The engineer who ran the thrasher was a small boy's dream. Because thrashing required several workers, local farmers would gather at each neighbor's farm to help out, before moving on to the next neighbor's farm. A huge noon meal and evening meal was served at each farm on the day the thrasher was there.

THE ROAD TO PEORIA. The road to Peoria via Hickory Point was considered the "timber road" because it was lined with trees.

A TRIP TO THE TIMBERLAND. An adventure beyond Henry's everyday world was an eight-to-ten-mile trip to Uncle John Sommers, who lived in the timberland along Partridge Creek. The road to his house just west of Metamora, unlike prairie roads that followed section lines, curved around the hills and streams. Because the family buggy didn't have brakes, Henry's mother would make the children dismount and walk down the steep hills while father John handled the team. This was the place where Henry's father, John, was born. John's sister Anna now lived there. Henry always regarded the timber dwellers as a little less civilized. They even spoke differently - "How did you find the crick?" Prairie farms were considered more fertile than the timber farms.





CHRISTIAN SMITH HOME PLACE This the "timber" home of John's parents, Christian and Catherine Smith, where John was born. It was located near the valley by Partridge Creek just north of Oak Ridge on the Hickory Point Road (although the old road that passed by the house has now been abandoned.) The plat map at the right highlights the "C. Smith" property. The home was later occupied by John's daughter, Anna, and her husband John Summer.

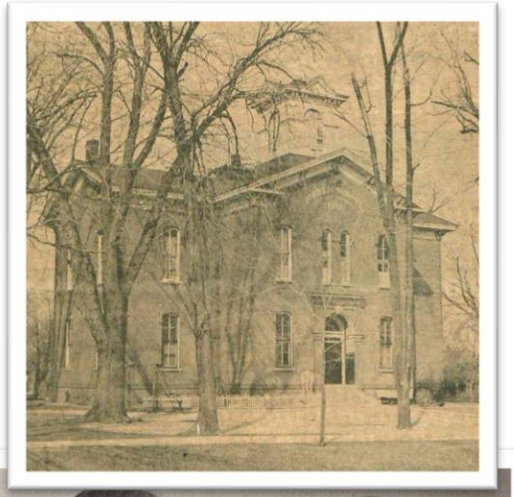
STAGE COACH ROUTE. "The stage coach route went from Fort Clark (Peoria), followed the watershed between Ten Mile Run and the Partridge tributaries, turned at the end of the timbered belt in a northeastern direction toward infant Chicago. Along this road were found Germantown in the timberland, and Hanover along the edge of the prairie. Also on the route were road houses – Sharps Corner, the Union House, and Hickory Point, where a farmer on his way to market could water his horses and refresh himself."

COUNTY SCHOOL. Henry's school was one half mile east of his home on the north side of what is now Route 116.

Christian & Catherine Smith Family, First Reunion, 1935, at Smith Home

SCHOOL DAYS. Boys and girls continued attending to school for a month or two each winter until they were 21 years old, unless they were married before that time, which was very often the case. After 12, the boys only went to school when the spring (after March 1) and fall (after corn husking) farm work was completed.

SCHOOL CHILDREN AT HENRY'S SCHOOL PLAYED "Dutch Ball," which was different than Townball. "The players were mostly boys, except Emma Lehman, who had big hands and could catch a ball as well as her brothers who were all good players."



HIGH SCHOOL. Pictured at right. Country boys seldom went to high school, and Mennonite boys never. But Henry's father was fairly progressive and allowed Henry to attend high school in Metamora after the crops were in. Henry had to study extra hard to catch up with the other students who had started school 2 months earlier. The school building contained four rooms and housed the whole school system of the town. The high school was given one room and one teacher; the grades the other three, but only two were used. This vacant room we turned into a play room during the noon intermission and the other vacant periods.

COUNTRY SCHOOL GRADUATION was based on the ability to read the "fifth reader" and not on grades.

HENRY'S FATHER, JOHN, AND HIS UNCLE CHRIS CAMP CONDUCTED A SINGING SCHOOL which met every Saturday night during the fall at the Camp schoolhouse one mile west of Henry's home. Mennonites were most interested in vocal music because instruments were not allowed, except for the "French harp." The singing schools flourished around Metamora for over 40 years.

SHOPPING. Shoppers in local stores typically negotiated for lower prices.

WHAT DID FARMS RAISE? Oats was a paying crop and grown more than wheat. The price of oats was much higher because it was used to feed the horses, which were still used for farming and transportation.

Friends from home visit Henry at Normal (ISU)

Standing, l to r – Chris Steider, Pete Sommers, Johnie Smith

Seated left to right – C. Henry Smith, Ben Schertz

THE FOURTH OF JULY WAS A GREAT CELEBRATION IN METAMORA. "Although the whole of life at this period seemed somewhat of a holiday, there were certain marked days which, because of their special interest, might well be called red-letter days. Chief of these was the Fourth of July celebration, an event to which we looked forward for weeks and remembered for months after-ward. Metamora, being a county seat town, celebrated every year. For weeks before the great event we hoped and prayed for a day of sunshine; and great was our disappointment if it turned out otherwise. The Fourth, coming as it did at the end of corn plowing time and a few days before haymaking, could be enjoyed by the farmer with a clear conscience, for he could take a day off without neglecting any important work.

"The day was usually ushered in early in the morning, some-times before we boys were out of bed, by the sound of booming cannon from our village three miles away. If the day started bright and clear, we arose with light hearts and went about our morning chores in gay spirits and with a deliberation not known on ordinary days. By nine o'clock the long stream of horses and vehicles from the east began to file past our home, along the dusty road, all headed for the county seat. Men, women, and children of all ages, dressed in gay holiday attire, and in a holiday mood, passed by in all sorts of vehicles: whole families in big overflowing carriages, or if they came from the "Low Dutch" settlement in Linn township, perhaps in farm wagons; boys on the backs of big, tired plow horses which kicked up a cloud of dust with every step of their clumsy Clydesdale hoofs; some in two-wheeled sulkies, all bedecked in the national colors; all supremely happy, looking forward to a day of great fun.

"But the happiest of all were the young swains who, all dressed up in the latest fashions, seated in shining piano box top buggies with their best girls by their sides, were driving their highest stepping carriage horses, with both harness and buggy all covered with blue, red, and white celluloid rings, and flags and streamers. To them this was the big day of the year. For many, this was the beginning of a friendship that ended in a life-long partnership. For weeks they had agonized over the uncertainties of this occasion. If the girl on whom the country boy had set his heart consented to help him celebrate the Fourth, he had about won his suit; but if she refused, there was little further hope. For the boy in the country had but one girl, his best; and she, like Mary's little lamb, went with him everywhere he went. And so, the Fourth of July was the day when many a country lover, if he had a horse and buggy, began his suit for a life mate. On this particular Fourth of which I am speaking,

“Ben, Pete, John Camp, and I had decided to spend the day together. Pete had agreed to hitch up his broncho to his brother’s sulky and call for Ben and me on our way down to John’s home, which was only a short distance from town, and where we were to leave our broncho for the day.

“We arrived in town just too late for the big parade, which the businessmen and some of the country organizations had put on; but the square and streets were full of people. The whole countryside evidently had come in to celebrate the glorious day. Old farmers were gathered in clusters, talking over farm prospects, no doubt; young married women, wiping the perspiration from their red faces, squalling babies in arms, followed by broods of two or three a little older, in danger of being run over in the general scramble, were edging their way along the crowded sidewalk, pretending to enjoy they knew not what, their young husbands in the meantime visiting one of the five overcrowded saloons in the village, quenching their thirst; young country lovers from the “‘timber” to the west, be-decked with flags and badges, a sack of peanuts in one hand, the other free to help themselves to the contents of the sack and occasionally generously offer some to their feminine partners; small boys of all ages sucking barber pole candy sticks and throwing lighted firecrackers at the feet of timid girls running loose everywhere; lemonade and popcorn stands in every corner, cane booths, and various games of chance all over the shady park in the square—all this we saw as we mingled with the boisterous crowd.

“We four boys began our tour of inspection of everything there was to see, and first we began with spending a bit of our money. I had fifty cents, Ben had a dollar, and the other boys, I believe, a quarter apiece. We started in by buying a bottle of pop each; of course, each paid for his own. Then Ben bought a bunch of fire crackers for ten cents, and I a sack of peanuts. John reluctantly saved the rest of his quarter for the time being. All morning we wandered aimlessly about, keenly interested in every unusual sight and sound. Everything seemed strange and new.

“It took very little to. attract our attention—the clever sayings of the lemonade venders, the small boy setting off his firecracker under a tin can. Frequently we ran across boys of our own acquaintance, always in groups; it seemed that none of the country boys dared appear by themselves in the big crowd; especially interested were we in some of the big boys we knew, who appeared with their best girls perhaps for the first time. We thought they looked sheepish, as though ashamed of being caught by their young acquaintances.

“We visited all the candy booths and spent our money freely, so long as it lasted, on an assortment of pop, lemonade, and peanuts. Once, succumbing to the gambling spirit within us rather than to the urge of hunger, we all invested in a five-cent prize box of candy. Ben drew a big yellow stick pin shaped like an elephant, Pete a butterfly, John a shining red marble, and I a nice gold ring, which I wore the rest of the day.

“Time passed rapidly; before we knew it, the various family groups had scattered about everywhere under the shade trees, enjoying their basket dinners and reminding us that it was high noon.

“Although my stomach had begun to rebel against the morning’s mixture of sweets and drinks, and all appetite had been more than satisfied, the lure of the unusual rather than the pangs of hunger drew us over to a lunch counter near the corner of Abersole’s grocery, where Pete and John each spent their last dimes for a ham sandwich and a cup of coffee, and I the last but one. In the afternoon we parted company.

“Ben and Pete, whose tastes ran along lines slightly different from mine, went to Wilson’s pasture near the east end of town, to see the ball game be-tween the Roanoke Blue Socks and the Metamora White Caps and to watch the sack races and the greased pole contest. John and I decided to remain in the park for the speaking and the band concert by Spencer’s Band from Peoria. The speaker of the day was also from Peoria, and thus a man of importance in our eyes, for Peoria was a big city of 50,000. His speech was preceded by “a few remarks from our distinguished citizen and fellow townsman, Honorable Joel Ranney.” Back in the late seventies, Mr. Ranney had spent one term in the state legislature, and ever after that he had been an “Honorable.” On every Fourth of July celebration, he sat on the speaker’s stand, and no public occasion was ever complete without a few re-marks from “our distinguished fellow citizen.” It was well that the village made much of its prize citizen, for he was the only “Honorable” they could ever boast of; some years later, after he had become too old to appear on public occasions, he was succeeded as a public institution by a citizen only slightly less distinguished, “Squire” Fran Giehl.

“The band concert was the climax of the day. A brass band always had an indefinable attraction for me. Its music transformed the whole world for the time being. It made me forget all the small and unpleasant details of the everyday grind of life and lifted me up into a magical realm of unrealized fancies and high resolves. Its ceasing was like the ending of a beautiful dream. Thus, when the band concert ended, I had little interest left in the remaining events of the day. “Tm ready to go home,” I said to John. “Let’s go to your house and run your new thrashing machine.” “All right,” John replied, “but I’d like to see the bicycle race first.” “I’ll set ‘em up to a glass of milk shake over at Pelz’s drug-store; I still have a dime left,”’ I added. John, whose money had all been spent for some time, readily agreed to this compromise, and we soon found ourselves busy with his make-believe thrasher.”

LINCOLN’S FRIEND. “Conrad Rohman, a retired merchant, though not an Easterner, had known Lincoln well and had often pitched horseshoe with him. He told me a number of stories about the great man, one of which at least I never believed, though I give it here as Rohman told it. In the early fifties Lincoln had as a client a woman who was being tried in the old courthouse for the murder of her husband. Feeling ran so high against her, and the circumstantial evidence was so strong that Lincoln, believing her to be innocent of the crime, but doubting his ability to free her, advised her to try to escape through the heavy woods just back of the poorly-guarded jail, and helped her to get away from the courthouse. ‘The story never seemed plausible to me, but Rohman, who had occasion to know all parties in the case, insisted on its authenticity.”

PARENTS DISAPPROVE OF "TOWN GIRLS." "As an impressionable boy of sixteen, I, of course, was not exempt from the little heart affairs to which boys of that tender age are sometimes susceptible. My parents did not approve of close association with town boys and girls, especially girls. Neither did I have much opportunity for attending the school functions of the school young people, for I drove back and forth from the country each day. But I found occasional moments, as boys will, sometimes stolen from tedious school hours or surreptitiously taken on Sunday afternoons in the spring or summertime to enjoy a stroll down the numerous lovers' lanes leading from the village to the woods beyond. Like Tom in the old poem, "Forty Years Ago," who cut his name on an elm and his sweetheart's just below, I cut mine with Alice's across a fallen log that bridged the little brook in a romantic spot in the hickory and hazel woods near the cemetery road. But unlike Tom's elm, my log had disappeared at the time of my last visit to the spot long before the forty years had passed."

AS FOR THE GIRLS, "my parents shared the traditional Mennonite country prejudice against anything that might lead to a life partnership between Mennonite country boys and non- Mennonite town girls. And in the country, to call on a girl more than once was a sign that you were going to be married. The first call was about equal to a proposal; while to see her but once meant that you wanted to marry her, but "got the mitten" instead. Except for an occasional call on Alice, or a meeting with her at a favorite trysting place near the log where I had cut both our names sometime before, I saw little during this time of those with whom I studied and played in the happy high school days."

PARTRIDGE CHURCH. On Sunday I sat for several hours on a hard straight-backed bench in a plain little meetinghouse, listening to a farmer-preacher discoursing in German on the sins of wearing a gold watch chain or attending the county fair.

We attended services at two meetinghouses "when I was a boy, one located seven miles to the west called the Partridge church, pronounced "Patridge" by the older people; and the other six miles east in Roanoke township. My father preached in the Roanoke meetinghouse, but we boys all ultimately became members of Partridge. It was customary at this time for neighboring congregations in central Illinois to hold their services on alternating Sundays. This practice was the survival of an earlier day before there were any meetinghouses. Meetings were held in the homes of the members, rotating among the worshipers. As the original Partridge settlement expanded to the east, across the prairies beyond the timbered belt along Partridge Creek, meetinghouses were finally built at both ends of the settlement, one in the timber, the other on the prairie. Services were held alternately, though each congregation was a separate ecclesiastical unit, and few worshipers attended both services.

Partridge Mennonite Church West of Metamora

"Unfortunately for us, at least so we thought then, we lived just halfway between the two churches; and so, having no good excuse for taking an "off 'Sunday, we usually had to attend both my father's church and our own. Of the two, I preferred going to Partridge, especially because the timber road was much more attractive than the one across the prairie. It ran through our home village, always a place of interest even on a quiet "Sabbath" morning, and beyond that it followed the old stage road leading to Germantown and Peoria.

"All along the way this road was bordered with interesting old landmarks. Just beyond the village, at the fork where one branch turned off toward Washington, was a primitive old log barn built in 1831 by one of the old Mennonite pioneers, Peter Engel. Engel's son, also called Peter, later kept a tavern here at which, according to tradition, Abe Lincoln, then a circuit lawyer, often stopped for refreshments on his way to court at Metamora from the county seat at Tazewell County. It is entirely possible, of course, that the great man may often have whiled away an hour or two here, since he frequently passed this way and was fond of good company.

"A little farther on, the road passed an old tile factory where smoking kilns were always objects of curiosity. 'Then for three miles it led through virgin timber, full of thrills for the prairie boy with its strange sights and unusual sounds—the big elm and hickory trees, the yellow soil so different from the deep black loam of the prairies, the hazel bushes, the big brown squirrels skipping along the top of the rail fence, and the shrill cry of the saucy blue jay which never found its way to our prairie home.

"Just before reaching the little brick meetinghouse well on the way to Germantown, we passed Hickory Point, an early road house, where we occasionally stopped for a drink of "pop"; and which in an earlier day, according to tradition, was the scene of many a drinking bout and other riotous occasions among the "bush whackers"' of the region.

"The prairie road to the Roanoke church, on the other hand, was a dull and monotonous thoroughfare, with no old landmarks of unusual interest to attract attention. It possessed but one redeeming feature. In the spring and summer when the black mud was deep and sticky on the main highways, we could drive almost the entire distance over the smooth, clean sod of the unused side roads, which were hardly affected by even the heaviest rains. But even this advantage did not compensate for the hickory trees and the blue jays. The lure of the timber road may explain largely why I preferred the Partridge church to my father's church on the prairie."

The Black "Patridge"? meetinghouse, "so named after the pioneer settlement along Black Partridge Creek, was one of the oldest Amish meetinghouses west of Ohio. It was a modest structure of brick, with a low roof and an annex in the rear called the 'Kaemmerle' (little room) used as a consulting room for the ministers and a rest room for weary mothers with crying babies. Inside the main building there

were four rows of straight-backed, home-made benches, two on the right or men's side, and two on the left reserved for the women. Through the middle ran a partition wall a little higher than the benches, dividing the sexes. Across the right-hand corner in the rear was a raised platform with a long bench and high table for the preachers."

The services, conducted in the German language, were long and dry, designed primarily for sedate adults, with little to attract a small boy. '

THE TELEPHONE COMES TO THE FARM. "In spite of the hard times of the middle nineties, the wheels of social progress were continually moving forward. Steady advance was being made in the discovery of new processes and the invention of new appliances that greatly increased the comforts and happiness of man, and broadened his social outlook and mental horizon. The farmer and the country boy shared these advantages with others. Country loneliness, especially, was rapidly disappearing.

"Although the telephone had been in use in the cities for years, up to this time it had never occurred to the farmer that it was meant for him as well as for his city cousin. He still called his thrashing hands and the family doctor on a swift horse, still made his visits to his relatives and friends unannounced, and invited himself to dinner unbidden.

"But finally, one day it occurred to some farmer with a little more imagination than was possessed by his neighbors to connect his home with that of his friends and trading village on a telephone line. This telephone was found to be such a convenience to the men and such a comfort to the women that soon other houses were likewise connected.

"The mania for telephones spread like that later for Eskimo pie. Within two or three years every farm home in the Mississippi Valley was connected with some local telephone company. I remember that for several years, while the fever was at its height, 'telephone' was the sole topic of conversation at the dinner table when we had company.

"Once installed, this easy means of communication proved such a necessity to the farmer that all wondered why someone had not thought of its benefits long ago. To the women, especially, this new method of social intercourse was a veritable godsend, lightening the exacting household duties with many an hour of long-distance gossip. To be sure, since these telephones were all on party lines, the listeners occasionally heard bits of news not meant for their ears."

GETTING A BICYCLE OPENS UP THE WORLD. "These were still the horse and buggy days. For most people four or five miles was still the visiting radius. Ten miles was an extended journey; while a visit of fifteen or twenty miles to friends or relatives was an event long to be remembered. But for the young men the cruising radius was soon greatly extended by the coming of the "safety" bicycle.

"This safety was almost prohibitive for the average boy at first because of the high price. With the lowering of the price, however, and especially with the introduction of the pneumatic tire, the bicycle mania spread until nearly every boy in the community was the proud possessor of this rapid means of travel. Used bicycles, like used automobiles later, soon became the stock in trade of even the boy with the most meager income.

"I got my first wheel from our hired man in a trade for an old shotgun. We were no longer confined now in our social intercourse to our own immediate community. On Sunday afternoons, especially, we were often on our wheels visiting our friends and cousins some miles away; and frequently during a week end we rode to Hopedale or Flanagan, heretofore a prohibitive distance except by train, to visit the young people of other Mennonite communities."

AND THE GAS-POWERED ENGINE IS INTRODUCED. "The automobile had not yet made its appearance in the country districts; but the gas engine, which made the automobile possible, was just being introduced. The first one in our village was installed in the local grain elevator to replace the faithful old blind mare that for years had turned the horse-power that elevated the grain from the dump on the ground floor to the bins on the top floor of the tall building. The most familiar sounds that greeted the ears of the country boy as he came to town were the irregular explosions of the single-cylinder gas engine as he entered the village and the ringing blows of the blacksmith's hammer in the smithy just across from the public Square."

AFTER HIS YOUTH. This concludes a few selected highlights of Henry's youth, growing up in rural Metamora as a "Mennonite County Boy." His love of learning and education highlighted his adult life as a student at what is now ISU, a graduate of the University of Illinois, a doctorate from the elite University of Chicago, on the staff of what is now Goshen College and as a professor and foremost Mennonite researcher at Bluffton College.

8 Jun 1875

Metamora Township, Woodford County, Illinois, USA

DEATH

18 Oct 1948 (aged 73)

Lima, Allen County, Ohio, USA

BURIAL

Maple Grove Cemetery

Bluffton, Allen County, Ohio, USA

Metamora Girls Basketball Team Cleans Up!

Coach Kyle Wyeneth and his 2022-23 girls' basketball team lent a helping hand to manicure the grounds of the Stevenson House. The ladies worked hard and did a GREAT job! Thanks so much to these hardworking Redbirds! Best of luck girls and Coach Weyeneth on your upcoming season. GO BIRDS!!!

Contact Us

Questions, ideas - Love to hear from you

Laure Adams, President, 369-2353 or jrfarmer@mtco.com; Dave Pohlman, Vice President 369-3290; pohlman46@yahoo.com 367-4426; Jim Efaw, Secretary, 367-6099 or jimefaw-mahp@eggroll.com; Jack Weddle, Treasurer, 645-0963, jweddle@mtco.com; Board members: Lee Summer, 367-4059, 635-0259, lsummer@mtco.com Mary Curry, 367-2185, curry@mtco.com; Rick Lotz, 648-2010, lots@mtco.com