

BHLA News and Notes

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Ralph E. Smeltzer and the Selma Civil Rights Movement

by Steve Longenecker, Bridgewater College

Ralph E. Smeltzer, a national staff person for the Church of the Brethren, arrived in Selma, Alabama, on November 25, 1963, for a three-day fact-finding trip. Smeltzer walked the streets of Selma over one year before Martin Luther King, Jr., first appeared in this very segregated community.

Selma was the highpoint of the Civil Rights Movement. The prolonged campaign there included a violent attack on marchers on the now-famous Edmund Pettus Bridge, President Lyndon B. Johnson's "We Shall Overcome" speech, a five-day march from Selma to Montgomery, passage of the landmark Voting Rights Act, and three deaths. Selma also brought brief unity to the oft-divided Civil Rights Movement and attracted numerous white celebrities to rural Alabama to lend a hand in this great cause to extend voting rights to African Americans. Selma represents a milestone in the evolution of American democracy.

A committed career path for social justice led Smeltzer to Selma. During World War II, he and his wife, Mary Blocher Smeltzer, left their public school teaching jobs to assist Japanese-Americans, and after the war he served as Director of Brethren Relief in Austria. Then Smeltzer obtained a seminary degree and joined the national staff at Elgin as Director of Peace and Social Education for the Brethren Service Commission. After reorganization his employer was the General Brotherhood Board.

Smeltzer first learned about Selma through a visit to national civil rights staff in Atlanta, Ga. The opportunity to prevent violence in Selma intrigued him, and for eighteen months Smeltzer visited and monitored circumstances in this badly divided community from afar by telephone. Selma consumed approximately one quarter of his worktime.

Smeltzer focused his efforts primarily on the local Selma community rather than the national civil rights campaign. He knew national staff, especially Andy Young and C. T. Vivian, but his biggest contribution was to local leadership. In fact, when King came to town, Smeltzer usually left because the attention generated by the famous civil rights leader and the media who followed him overwhelmed local circumstances.

Mostly by serving as a good listener, the quiet, Yankee preacher became one of the few with knowledge of black and white Selma, and he won the confidence of leadership in both camps, a singular achievement. That nobody in Selma on either side had heard of the Church of the Brethren helped because it left him unencumbered with identity. With white moderates he overcame the “outsider” label, and federal government representatives, especially the Community Relations Service, also cooperated with Smeltzer and relied on him for information.

Smeltzer scored a number of achievements in Selma. He assisted the badly divided black community to coalesce behind several local leaders, and then he passed along that information to white leadership, who were clueless about influential blacks in Selma. Interracial negotiations, even without agreement, represented progress in race relations—a seismic shift no less—and Smeltzer was critical in their creation. He believed that by helping blacks unite, by accelerating their appearance at the bargaining table, and by enhancing the articulation of their agenda, he advanced civil rights and simultaneously eased community tensions.

Smeltzer was less successful with die-hard segregationists, including sheriff Jim Clark. Hard-core white supremacists accepted racial peace only on their terms, and their suspicion of anyone outside their community, especially those who did not march in lockstep with unyielding segregation, bordered on paranoia. Smeltzer also presciently warned white moderates that the arrival of the national movement might result in violence, and he counseled them that a few concessions would help them avoid the whirlwind of the King movement. They listened, a testament to Smeltzer’s influence, but ultimately they did not act on his advice. All of this fell outside the spotlight. Partially, this was for personal safety. Smeltzer’s mission was risky; people died in the South because of civil rights. But keeping his head down and letting others take credit for success also enhanced Smeltzer’s mission. He told few about his activities and avoided boasting of his achievements.

Ralph Smeltzer is an unsung Brethren hero, and his relative anonymity fits with his self-effacing role in Selma. He was intimately involved, albeit behind the scenes, in the landmark event that is one of America’s proudest moments. Sometimes a bold Here-I-Stand approach works best, but other times standing up for Jesus is most effective when immersed in old-fashioned humility. In Selma Smeltzer demonstrated that quiet selflessness and bold social justice are eminently compatible.



Stephen Longenecker with Ralph Smeltzer.

New Book by Stephen Longenecker-*Gettysburg Religion: Refinement, Diversity, and Race in the Antebellum and Civil War Border North*

By D. B. Eller, Mt. Joy, Pennsylvania

Gettysburg? Few events are more central to the American experience than the three day battle that took place at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, just a few miles north of the Maryland state line, between Union and Confederate armies July 1-3, 1863. Indeed, many historians consider the Battle of Gettysburg to be the watershed event in American history. It led to eventual Union victory, the end of slavery, and the emergence of modern industrial America. To be clear—as the book’s subtitle elaborates—Longenecker’s fine study is not about the battle. Rather, building on a previous work, *Shenandoah Religion: and the Mainstream* (2002), Longenecker carefully explores the transitions that denominations experienced in molding nineteenth century America’s Protestant majority. The focus in *Gettysburg Religion* is “refinement” by which the author means a striving for improvement in both church and personal life. While advancement varied from congregation to congregation, it might mean might doctrinal clarification over revivalism, language shifts, the creation of a well-landscaped ecumenical cemetery (Evergreen), or the construction of a new, larger, ornate, and well-furnished church building.

Following an introductory chapter describing the region (essentially Adams County and environs), the author devotes chapters to refinement in theory and practice, diversity in race and doctrine, and a concluding account of the battle and its impact. (On this latter point, Longenecker somewhat surprisingly concludes that military actions in southern Pennsylvania that June and July had little lasting impact on Gettysburg religion. Two exceptions were use for several months of the town’s church buildings as makeshift hospitals, and the stretching of already severely limited financial resources.)

The author gives significant attention to the variety within Gettysburg’s overwhelmingly Protestant groups. Lutheranism, with two parishes, a college, and seminary, was the dominant faith tradition, but the book gives full attention to the town’s Catholic Church, St. Francis Xavier, and the only Black church, a struggling African Methodist Episcopal Zion congregation. The role women in Gettysburg’s religions is not neglected, and an especially attractive feature of the book are “Divertimento” (a musical term for “lighthearted”) pages inserted between chapters. These brief biographical vignettes, in which women are prominently featured, provide a fascinating and insightful glimpse into the lives of representative Gettysburg families. Because Longenecker defines Gettysburg proper as the town and battlefield (that is, farms to the west and south of town), he is able to include another example of religious diversity, the Brethren, to his study. It may come as a surprise for contemporary Brethren to learn that one of the most fiercely contested engagements on the battle’s second day took place in the “Peach Orchard” of Dunker farmer-preacher Joseph Sherfy (1812-1882), a leader of the Marsh Creek congregation, whose 1852 meetinghouse was located a few miles north of town. At least two other military engagements of the battle, the “Devils Den” and “Little Round Top” also took place on Sherfy property. As nonresistant, countercultural Christians, Marsh Creek Dunkers kept a low profile during the war years. But they also contributed to the needs of area

residents (including the Sherfys) who suffered property losses, and they were forced to adjust their relationship to the state.

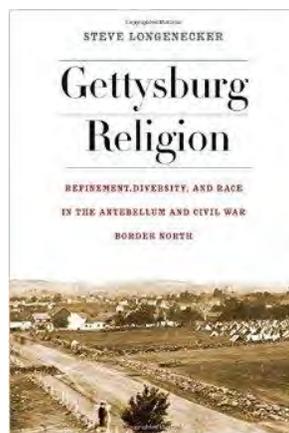
As might be suspected, Brethren do not fit neatly into Gettysburg religion's progress toward refinement. Dunker farmers might have sought greater personal wealth (Sherfy's advertised "battlefield peaches" became well known a decade or so after the war). Yet even a cursory reading of Yearly Meeting minutes from this era suggests Brethren scorned refinement as vain, or worse, "worldly"—no salaried or educated clergy, no meetinghouse bells or church spires, no padded pews or robed choirs. Such things, they believed, detracted from the purity of their primitive faith.

One topic Longenecker touched on briefly but could have expanded, perhaps into a separate chapter, is the progress of civil religion at Gettysburg. He recognizes, for example, that area clergy connected the Union war effort with God's will. But he might have also explored how Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address became a sort of manifesto for a secular faith that merges God and country that is widespread in contemporary American society. In his dedication of the national cemetery at Gettysburg in the fall of 1863 (for Union soldiers only), Lincoln used familiar religious language that blended patriotism and Biblical themes. These themes include death, sacrifice, and rebirth of the nation—reminiscent of the life and death Jesus and birth of Christianity; and they were further reinforced by Lincoln's own tragic death and sacrifice for the nation less than two years later. With God marching firmly on the Union side, did General Lee and the Confederacy ever have a chance?

Gettysburg Religion makes a significant contribution to the study of American religion in the nineteenth century. It is well organized, based on primary sources, crisply and engagingly written—the descriptions of theological transitions and growing prosperity within the Lutheran and Methodist traditions are particularly well done. This book deserves the attention of scholars of American religion, Civil War enthusiasts, Gettysburg tourists, regional historians, and students of Brethren history.

Steven Longenecker is Professor of History at Bridgewater College in Virginia. His other books include *Brethren During the Age of World War* (2006); *Piety and Tolerance: Pennsylvania German Religion, 1700-1850* (2000); *Selma's Peacemaker: Ralph Smeltzer and Civil Rights Mediation* (1987); and *The Christopher Sauers: Courageous Printers Who Defended Religious Freedom in Early America* (1981).

Steve Longenecker. *Gettysburg Religion. Refinement, Diversity, and Race in the Antebellum and Civil War Border North*. New York: Fordham University Press, The North's Civil War series, 2014. Pp. 246. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index.



BHLA Notes

Aaron Neff Named BHLA Intern

Aaron Neff is serving as this year's (2015-2016) internship in the Brethren Historical Library and Archives (BHLA). Aaron is a 2015 graduate of Rollins College, Winter Park, Florida where he received a Bachelor of Arts degree in music and history. A member of the Church of the Brethren Aaron has attended National Youth Conference, the Christian Citizenship Seminary and the Bridgewater Round Table.

BHLA Receives Dale Brown Papers

The Dale Brown Papers documents the influential and prophetic teaching and preaching ministry of beloved Bethany Theological Seminary faculty member Dale W. Brown. Much of the collection is made up of correspondence (ranging from 1954 through 2009) between Dale Brown and numerous figures in the Church of the Brethren, the Christian pacifist community, and Christian advocates for social action ranging from Donald W. Dayton, Jim Wallis John Howard Yoder and M. R. Zigler. Another significant aspect of the collection is Dale Brown's sermons which range in date from 1946 through 2005. The collection documents Brown's leadership in such organizations Brethren Action Movement, Evangelicals for Social Action, New Call for Peacemaking, and Chicago Declaration of Evangelical Social Responsibility. Also included are a number of copies of his published articles from 1955 through 2005, papers from his period as Annual Conference moderator (1971-1972), class syllabi, lectures, handouts, and subject files from his research.

BHLA Receives Mutual Aid Association of the Church of the Brethren Papers

In 1879 Annual Conference allowed members to organize a mutual fire insurance company if it did not compromise church principles. Among the groups answering this call was the Brethren.

The Brethren Mutual Aid Society of Northeast Kansas organized April 1, 1885 at Ozawkie in Jefferson Co. to help Brethren share losses from fire, lighting, and storm. P.R. Wrightsman of Emporia was the first president. In 1908 the organization became the Mutual Aid Association of the Church of the Brethren (MAA). It was operated from the secretaries' homes until offices were built in 1973 in the Buckeye community near Abilene.

Today the MAA still operates out of Abilene Kansas with the mission "To provide opportunity for Brethren members to support one another in a quality mutual insurance program, upheld by financial stability, excellent service, responsible use of resources and Christian teachings of caring and sharing together in a faith community."

In the fall of 2014, the BHLA became the repository for the Records of the MAA. Records include correspondence, MAA reports, photographs, advertisement materials and ledgers.

BHLA Books for Sale

The BHLA website contains a list of duplicate used books for sale. We would like to highlight several titles. Rufus Bowman Church of the Brethren and War 1708-1941--\$25.00; Don Durnbaugh, ed., The Church of the Brethren Past and Present (1971)-- \$12.00; D. L. Miller, The Seven Churches in Asia--\$10.00; Kurtz, Blough, Ellis, Studies in Doctrine and Devotion--\$10.00; Miller & Royer, Some Who Led --\$10.00; Dan West, The Coming Brotherhood--\$6.00. A mostly complete list can be found here-<http://www.brethren.org/bhla/documents/bhla-books-for-sale.pdf>. All books are postpaid. Please send payment to BHLA, 1451 Dundee Ave., Elgin, IL 60120.



Mission Statement

The Brethren Historical Library and Archives is the official repository for Church of the Brethren publications and records. Its purpose is to keep alive the Brethren faith heritage, by:

- Collecting and preserving materials relating to the cultural, socio-economic, theological, genealogical, and institutional history of the Brethren;
- Giving historical perspective and understanding to the mission of the church through counsel and publication;
- Providing a centralized Brethren research center and;
- Serving as a clearinghouse for information on Brethren historical materials in other repositories.

Some Recent Additions to the Brethren Historical Library and Archives

Don Miller Papers, 22 linear feet, 1951-2010. Please look for a fuller description in our next newsletter.

C. Wayne Zunkel Papers, 2 feet, 1960s-2001. Collection includes materials from Zunkel's pastorates and leadership in the Brethren Peace Fellowship and trips to Africa and Korea.

Carl Myers Sermons, 1940s-2004. Sermons of Church of the Brethren leader Carl Myers. The collection may contain some unidentified sermons of his father F. A. Myers.

Brethren Brass, 2002-2013. Booklet includes pictures of Brethren Brass a Church of the Brethren musical group founded by Wayne Guyer. The group visited all Church of the Brethren Middle Pennsylvania District churches.

Records of the Mutual Aid Association Church of the Brethren, 3 feet, 1885-2012. The records include minutes, correspondence, reports, photographs, promotional literature and 2 VHS tapes. Please see fuller description elsewhere in this newsletter.

Robert Ebey's type script copy of his notes and experiences as a Seagoing Cowboy, 1946-1947 with Brethren Service to Poland.

Spittler Family and Mill Creek Church of the Brethren documents, 1797-1905 2.5 inches. Includes correspondence of Magdalene Spittler Seitz to Isaac Seitz, Lewis Seitz to Samuel Spittler, legal documents concerning the extended Spittler family and the Mill Creek (VA) Church of the Brethren.

Nettie M. Senger Papers, linear 1.3 feet, 1910s-1950s. Senger's papers document her career as a Church of the Brethren missionary to China. Collection includes a photograph album, writings and Chinese publications.

Lora Mainard [Egge] Letters, 1957-1961. Letters of Lora Mainard, Church of the Brethren missionary to Nigeria, written to Katherine Roehl of Lexington, Michigan describing the challenges, rewards of a preacher and teacher in Nigeria during an important period in the history of Church of the Brethren missions in Nigeria.

Copies of correspondence of Dan West with Church of the Brethren leader L. C. Blickenstaff, 1940-1941.

Quilt from the Naperville Church of the Brethren includes names of quilters, 1930s.

Child Rescue Home Records, Ankeny, Iowa. Collection includes correspondence, 1919-1932.

Buckeye(Kansas) Church of the Brethren records includes church history (1980), minutes and transfer records and Sunday school records, 1886-1980.

Please let us know if your mailing address has changed by emailing us at brethrenarchives@brethren.org. Thank you!

Historical Documents Wanted

In an effort to reclaim storage space, church leaders often discard documents, not realizing that they tell the story of the work of people of God in communities around the world. If you have items relating to the history of your congregation, district or even ministries of the national church, even bulletins from special services, please forward them to the BHLA. Our address is BHLA, 1451 Dundee Ave., Elgin, IL 60120.



Brauer/Brower family pass which is part of the BHLA collection. A pass was required of any person or family who wished to emigrate from Germany to America in the 18th century. Akin to a passport or travel paper, the Brauer Pass was issued on May 1, 1726, to Hubert Brauer (Brower) and his family from the Rhine River town of Fuss Gonheim. The pass along with some other documents were donated to BHLA in 2007 by Brower descendant, Dr. David A. Otto, Ph.D., and his wife, Elizabeth, of Fort Mill, South Carolina.

Support the BHLA with Your Financial Gifts

The Brethren Historical Library and Archives is supported through the Core Ministries fund of the Church of the Brethren. Financial gifts to the church are not only welcomed but needed. Please send your checks payable to the Church of the Brethren to BHLA 1451 Dundee Ave., Elgin, IL 60120.