

## Roots that run deep

by Lois Bontrager

Noah Bontrager, Middlebury, Ind., had agreed to share his CPS story at the Oct. 30 Menno-Hof event: "Serving God and country: then and now" but he passed on to his eternal reward Sept. 17, 2011. Noah's daughter-in-law, Lois, agreed to write this article so that his story could still be shared.

As I look out my window, I see a large silver maple tree that towers above my home. It gently sways with the breeze and humbly bends to the wind. It is a tree that symbolizes the importance of putting your roots down and doing your job where you are planted.

Around 70 years ago, this tree had been a deformed seedling and could not be used at the Civilian Public Service (CPS) Tree Nursery where it had its beginning. Rather than dispose of the little maple sapling, it was brought here and tenderly planted and cared for. Many storms had to be weathered and the silver maple even survived the 1965 Palm Sunday tornado when five other trees in the same yard were uprooted and destroyed. It is not the most spectacular tree to look at but it has done its job well; it has provided protection from the cold north wind, given shade from the hot summer sun and helped clean the air we breathe. The third generation of our family has enjoyed these benefits from the strong maple tree.

As I look out another window of my home. I see the place where my father-in-law, Noah Bontrager, lived. His life speaks of the importance of putting your roots down and doing your job where you are planted.

August 28, 1941, is the date that went on the records of  
(continued on page 3)

## From "Anti" to "Ana"baptist

One man's journey from a pro-military anti-Mennonite home to being ordained in the Mennonite Church

by Bill Beck

I am a military veteran. And I am a Mennonite. Some Mennonites, when they have discovered that I have been in the military, have instantly ended our conversation. Others, after hearing my story, have told me I am a "real" Mennonite—someone who intentionally follows Jesus down the path of peace.

My father grew up in Kouts, Ind., a tiny town whose largest church—Hopewell Mennonite—was perceived as being very separatist in relation to non-Mennonites. My father was not Mennonite.

After graduating from high school, he spent four years in the Navy during the Korean War.

I grew up hearing tales of the high seas, of adventures in distant lands, of defending our shores from the enemy. I was raised to believe that it was a manly rite of passage to serve our country in the military. I envisioned the day when my children would be gathered around me as I told tales of defending God, country and family.

I also heard stories of cowards who were unwilling to serve their country, who took their liberties for granted, whose freedom was bought at the price of someone else's blood. These Mennonites often were referred to as "midnights" because they were not man enough to show their faces in town during broad daylight.

In high school I met a beautiful girl who was full of life and resolve from her relationship with the Lord. I attended church with her. I fell in love with her, and with her Lord. And I was blessed to have a Sunday school teacher who instilled in me a love for the Word of God.

After high school I enlisted in the army, with the blessing and support of our church. I was commended for my courage and willingness to serve our country during the tense time of the Iran hostage crisis.

One Sunday when I was home for a few days after basic combat training, my girlfriend (now my lovely wife) and some of her friends were going to sing at a friend's church. When my dad learned that I was going to hear Sherry sing at Valparaiso Mennonite, he said, "as soon as they find out you are in the military, they will throw you out of there so fast your head will be spinning." I could feel the blood drain from my face. I hadn't even thought about the church being Mennonite.

Having just come from basic training, *continued on page 2*



**Bill Beck** is currently the pastor of Locust Grove Mennonite Church, Burr Oak, Mich. He and his wife, Sherry, have five children. (photo provided)

**Civilian Public Service:** The program of alternative service created to provide an alternative means for conscientious objectors (men who refused to participate in acts of war on grounds of conscience) to fulfill their national service duties as outlined by the Selective Training and Service Act of 1940.

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**Bill Beck** and his son, **Tim.** “My prayer is that Tim can see God’s path for his life and have the courage to follow.” (photo provided)

**“It brought tears to my eyes remembering my youth where summers were spent on a Mennonite farm.”**  
—recent visitor response

**From “Anti” to “Ana”baptist** (cont from cover) I had no hair, which in 1980 meant one thing. And that one thing mixed with Mennonites like oil and water. I decided to go with Sherry but to do my best to be invisible. I had just learned in basic training that the art of concealment required making no noise and no movement. And that is exactly what I did. It must have worked because I survived—or maybe I received some grace that day.

After being trained as a medical laboratory specialist, I was shipped overseas and assigned to the 498th Combat Support Battalion of the Second Armored Division—“Hell on Wheels” at Garlstedt, West Germany. It was a lonely time for me. I adopted a philosophy that the many challenges I faced in this combat division were opportunities to excel and I had a very successful military career. I tell you this not to brag about myself but to show the amount of grace that God extended to me through His transforming power. He was preparing me for a “change of command.”

My military obligations ended after four years active duty and one year in the National Guard. Sherry and I returned to our home community and little country church. I was 24. We had been married four years and were expecting our third child. As we struggled to define who we were and what we believed, we discovered that family, reliance on the Word, and standing on convictions were important to us.

At that time our denominational magazine ran an ad stating that women have a constitutional right to abortion despite “perceptions” of what the Bible said. It caused us to think long and hard about what our denomination believed. It seemed it didn’t stand for much of anything. I remembered the Mennonites. At least they believed in something. In fact, they believed in something strongly enough to withstand scorn and ridicule from members of their community. Their “weaknesses” began to look like real strength.

Because of the influence of my high school Sunday school teacher, I continued to study the Bible. I started to develop an understanding of my role as a disciple of Jesus. I began to envision Jesus’ nature and character as a whole.

I found myself convicted by 1 Cor. 11: 1: “Follow my example as I follow the example of Christ.” What could this mean? I could not picture Jesus in battle-dress uniform, leading a patrol through the woods seeking to kill “enemies of the state!” If I could not picture

Jesus doing it—and I am to follow His example—how could I do it?

I began to believe that Jesus *meant* that we are to “love our enemies” and “turn the other cheek,” and “blessed are the peacemakers.” If my faith was to be real, I would have to follow despite my heritage. Jesus’ words echoed true for me: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.” (Luke 9:23)

To be a veteran means that the military is a part of my past. I can’t change my past—only my present. To be Mennonite is to choose to follow Jesus daily, starting today.

I chose to become a “real” Mennonite. I intentionally chose the way of Jesus—the way of discipleship and peace. In the Mennonite Church, Sherry and I found the same values that we defined for ourselves: family, reliance on the Word of God, and people of faith and conviction.

My parents did not take it well initially. They must have thought I was out of my mind. Twelve years later I became the senior pastor of the Mennonite church in the little town where my father grew up. Most Sundays when I preached, I could look out and see my parents sitting among our little Mennonite congregation. My father found a home at Hopewell Mennonite.

I would love to say that this is the happy ending to my military-to-Mennonite story. Painfully, we have learned that this is a two-way street. Two years ago our youngest son enlisted in the army. This one event has caused much soul searching on our part. Where did we go wrong as parents? How could I fail so miserably as a Mennonite pastor? Is our son rejecting us or just our values? Is he rejecting God?

Shortly before Tim left for basic training, I found peace and a closeness to God as Tim and I ice skated across Perrin Lake at Amigo Centre, Sturgis, Mich. Looking back, that day was a gift. We reaffirmed our love for each other. He articulated his faith in God (though not from a Mennonite perspective). I shared how much I valued him as a son.

Proverbs 22:6 says, “Train a child in *the way he should go*, and when he is old he will not turn from it.” The army certainly was not the way I wanted Tim to go. I had to remind myself that it is God who placed a call on Tim’s life. It is up to Tim (not me) to discern that call and choose to follow.

The day Tim left for basic training it felt like someone tore my heart out. I was so helpless. I was reminded of God’s assurance to Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9). I am so grateful for the grace that God has poured out on me as I walk this journey.

## Peace & Popcorn: a Menno-Hof winter series

~come and enjoy popcorn after each event!

☺ January 20, 2012, 7 p.m. at Menno-Hof  
**Healing of memories: Apology and forgiveness in our relationship with Lutherans and Catholics**  
*John Rempel, professor of theology and Anabaptist studies and associate director of the Institute of Mennonite Studies at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, Ind.; and André Gingerich Stoner, director of holistic witness and interchurch relations for Mennonite Church USA in Elkhart*

☺ February 19, 2012, 6 p.m. at Menno-Hof  
**Is the Gospel of peace still relevant?**  
*John D. Roth, professor of history at Goshen (Ind.) College*

☺ March 25, 2012, 6 p.m. at Menno-Hof  
**Forgiveness in an unforgiving world?**  
*Steve Nolt, professor of history at Goshen College*

☺ April 29, 2012, 6 p.m. at Siloam Fellowship, Goshen, Ind.  
**Swords into plowshares: How the Seagoing Cowboys helped repair a broken world**  
*Peggy Reiff Miller, Milford, Ind.*



### “Roots that run deep” (cont.)

Bontrager family history as the beginning of Noah's life-changing experience. That day, Noah was uprooted from his northern Indiana Amish home and went to work in CPS camps for the next four years because of his peace conviction and refusal to enlist in the war.

This was a difficult time for many CPS boys. It was risky to travel by public transportation during the war years because there were some people



**Planting trees** at the Civilian Public Service tree nursery in Medaryville, Ind. (photo provided)

### Impacting the world: how you can help

*This spring two Chinese ladies visited Menno-Hof. They were sent to the U.S. by the Chinese government to do a study on why Americans would voluntarily go to China to help with earthquake clean up when there was no compensation in it for themselves. At the end of their tour, our volunteers asked them what conclusions they came up with and they said “it has to have something to do with the God they worship.”*

This is just one of the many stories we could share of meaningful conversations with our visitors. We are thankful that Menno-Hof is sought out by so many individuals (over 20,000 a year) and that we have the privilege of having their attention for over an hour as they listen and learn.

At least 30% of our budget needs to come from donations. The staff and board are diligent in being the very best stewards of what God has given us. If you have already given—thank you! Your gifts do make a difference.

**We invite you to use the enclosed envelope to forward your tax-deductible contribution.**

who would ridicule and persecute those that were opposed to the war. Because he took a stand for what was good and right, Noah even encountered some conflict with a fellow worker at the camp. Years later, when he met this man again, Noah could honestly say that he harbored no ill feelings against him for the unkindness.

It was during his CPS years that Noah “put his roots down” and his faith in God was nourished. Noah wrote in his life story, “As much as we dreaded going to camp, after the four years were done I was never sorry for the experience. It was a growing time for me in my Christian life. In the year 1938 I realized the need of committing my life more wholly to the Lord and being a part of His church. I was baptized that summer which helped me realize the things in life that were even more important and also that some of the things in the past were not important as far as Christian growth. The CPS experience helped me learn more of the Bible and the importance of prayer and to live with other people and learn from them. I’ve thanked God many times for those experiences.”

It was in the Medaryville, Ind., CPS camp laundry room that Noah poured out his heart to God concerning a needed partner for him in his brother's upcoming wedding. God answered clearly with a special young lady named Mary Miller who later became his wife and mother to his six children. He related this story often with reverence and gratefulness to God for giving him such a wonderful life companion.

Noah worked at three different camps: Dennison, Iowa; Bluffton, Ind.; Medaryville, Ind. There was a special place in his heart for the people he learned to know at each of these places and strong bonds of friendship were formed.

Our family was deeply touched when dad's 93-year-old CPS friend, Eli Yoder from Benton, Ohio, traveled to Indiana for dad's funeral. What an example of commitment that runs deep.

Like the silver maple tree, Noah “put his roots down” and fulfilled the purpose God had for his life. His CPS experiences were a positive influence that continued to affect the rest of Noah's life and branched out to benefit the lives of many others—even to the third generation.

*Lois and her husband, Mervin, attend Woodlawn Amish Mennonite Church, Goshen, Ind., They have five children. Noah was also a member at Woodlawn.*

### TAKE NOTICE!

A local businessman has graciously offered to match up to **\$20,000** that we raise to upgrade the technology used in the Menno-Hof presentation. We welcome any and all contributions.

*Thank you to our loyal supporters, who have already contributed!*



**Noah Bontrager** (right), with CPS friend, John Stalter, at John's 93rd birthday party. John lives in Goshen, Ind., and was CPS camp director at Medaryville, Ind. (photo provided)

## DIRECTOR'S DESK

I can only believe the Lord was delighted with the 200+ folks that turned out for the "Serving God and country: then and now" event held at Siloam Fellowship, Goshen, Ind., on Sunday evening, October 30.

I pray for special blessings on the four men – Sherm Schrock, Topeka, Ind., Alvin Kauffman, Middlebury, Ind., Monroe Barkman, Topeka, and Luke Birky, Goshen, that shared their CPS experiences. From the questions presented by Sherm Kauffman, Goshen, (moderator) and their subsequent answers, it was clear that their CPS experiences helped shape their faith journey and life choices.

We at Menno-Hof were thrilled with the enthusiasm and spirit we sensed among the crowd. What a wonderful thing when the area's varied Anabaptist faith communities can come together in search of ways to learn from our history and share ideas for instilling and growing our core values among our young people today.

Dan B. Miller, representing Conservative Anabaptist Service Program (CASP), and André Gingerich Stoner, representing Mennonite Mission Network, provided insight on current dialog with the Selective Service System and initiatives that have been developed with an eye on ensuring our young folks have opportunities to participate in service that allows

them to live out their convictions while promoting peace throughout the world.

Although there is much opportunity for additional development, I walked away from the event with an increased sense of confidence that leaders in our various faith communities have an "eye on the ball."

Presently there are 15 conservative groups who have become affiliated with CASP. More information about CASP: Elmer Miller 574-642-3056.

To learn more about Mennonite Mission Network's relationship with Selective Service: [www.mennonitemission.net/Stories/News/Pages/MVSandSelectiveServicesignagreement.aspx](http://www.mennonitemission.net/Stories/News/Pages/MVSandSelectiveServicesignagreement.aspx)



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Reunion is published quarterly to keep our friends informed of happenings at Menno-Hof. Direct questions or comments to: [info@mennohof.org](mailto:info@mennohof.org).

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### Beginnings and endings

Menno-Hof hosts & hostesses:

**Fred Tillery** | Oct.—Dec. 31

#### James & Doreen Houston

Penticton, British Columbia, Canada  
Oct. 1—31

#### Jim & Bonnie Beachy

Paoli, Ind. | Nov. 28—Dec. 4

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*Thank you* for giving your time and care to Menno-Hof. May you be blessed as you have blessed us and the Menno-Hof visitors!



# MENNO-HOF

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