

## Annual Meeting to Feature Stories by Menno Duerksen

On May 13 the Mennonite Brethren Historical Society of the West Coast will hold its annual dinner meeting on the campus of Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary. This year's featured speaker will be Menno Duerksen, author of a recently-published collection of stories entitled *Dear God, I'm Only a Boy* [see review elsewhere in this issue]. Duerksen grew up in various Mennonite communities in Oklahoma and many of his stories reflect on the meaning of these formative years, both in a social and spiritual sense. For our program he will be reading a collection of stories that he has written since the publication of his book. Duerksen's unique style should provide for an evening that is both entertaining and thought-provoking.

Preceding the dinner meeting at 4:30 Kevin Enns-Rempel, Archivist of the Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, will present an introduction to the resources in the Center. Anyone who has ever been curious about the work of the Center is welcome to attend this informal session.

Specific information regarding the annual meeting can be found later in this issue.

### BOOK REVIEW

Menno Duerksen, *Dear God, I'm Only a Boy*. (Memphis: Castle Books, 1986) 416 pp.

Menno Duerksen, in his recent book, *Dear God, I'm Only a Boy*, provides a fascinating look at growing up in an economically weak and religiously conservative Mennonite community in rural Oklahoma. I read the book with great interest; parts of it probed into the very depths of my spiritual life.

Duerksen shows great respect for Mennonite characteristics such as their frugal lifestyle, their ability for hard work and their desire for peace on Earth. However, on issues of theology, Duerksen was far removed from the Mennonite thinking of his day. The most powerful parts of this book are the chapters reflecting on his struggle to be at peace with both God and his own spiritual self.

In the early chapters of the book, Duerksen recounts numerous "folksy" accounts of growing up in a farming community. He makes much of one of his father's wild stallions and its various exploits. He also devotes a good deal of space to his faithful dogs and relates a rather unbelievable story about a big rabbit. Living in the hills near Weatherford, Oklahoma, Duerksen naturally did a great deal of hunting and trapping. All of this makes for interesting reading.

My heart was gripped Duerksen's search for spiritual peace and contentment, and I was forced to examine my own life and motives as a so-called "fundamental" preacher. Duerksen and his family attended the "Friesen Church", a rural congregation led by his grandfather, Rev. Friesen. When Menno was a boy of about 14 years, arrangements were made for a big revival campaign at this church, during which he helped haul lumber from Weatherford to build temporary benches in the large tent that was being erected. Many of us attended. The meetings

were a great success, and I was one of those who found their way to the altar along with Menno and others. Menno describes in detail the all-night prayer meetings, of weeping and searching but never finding peace. He tells of giving an untruthful testimony of finding that peace. He was too honest to live with such a lie and finally cast it all aside, denying the reality of God--or at least, deciding that he had done all that he could do to find God and that it was now God's responsibility to reveal himself.

In later years, Duerksen became a respected newspaper reporter and war correspondent. The later chapters of his book relate the many fascinating experiences he had while travelling through Europe and the Middle East on various job assignments. He also tells the touching story of his wife's illness and death. Duerksen goes to great lengths in describing her terrible suffering and waiting for death. Through all of this he showed a kind spirit and tender touch as he sought to care for her; he was truly a faithful husband to the very end.

I come back to the main impact of the book. Duerksen was so disappointed in his father's Christianity that he had no use for it whatsoever. No doubt the extreme piety of his father as well as the very pietistic and sometimes cruel attitude of his evangelist brother-in-law did not present him with a Christianity that seemed to be worth pursuing. One example: his brother-in-law owned an airplane that he used in the course of evangelistic meetings. One day Duerksen asked him for a ride in the plane. The evangelist, who evidently didn't want to give Menno a ride, responded by saying he would first have to talk to the Lord about it. He never did offer the ride. Events like this only made Duerksen more bitter and cynical toward Christianity.

Menno was able in later years to finally resolve some of the tension he had felt toward his father. When his father lay on his deathbed, Menno came home to be at his bedside in the hour of need. He writes that for the first time he could say that his father's Christianity stood him in good stead. He died with great peace and assurance in his heart. I appreciated Menno's honesty in sharing this experience with his readers.

Do I recommend this book? Not to weak and questioning Christians who struggle with doubt. Duerksen is too critical of the faith of his fathers. However, his own deep search for truth and reality will test our faith and cause us to examine our ways as he lifts the shades to show us the other side.

Dan Friesen

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