

The January 1939 issue of *Mennonite Quarterly Review* introduced a new figure to American Mennonite scholarship, J. Winfield Fretz.<sup>1</sup> More than just a new name, he entered the scholarly dialogue as the first Mennonite on the verge of earning a Ph.D. in sociology.<sup>2</sup> Mennonites previous to Fretz certainly utilized sociological categories and engaged in sociological analysis. Leo Driedger and Calvin Redekop, in a pioneering study of the development of Mennonite sociology, suggested that a category of “social thought” existed as a precursor to Mennonite sociology.<sup>3</sup> Edmund G. Kaufman was an exemplar of that previous tradition. His first major book, *The Development of the Missionary and Philanthropic Interest Among the Mennonites of North America* (1931), trafficked in sociological theory—the sect cycle—to interpret Mennonite history and missionary activity.<sup>4</sup> Among his many roles at Bethel, Kaufman was also a Professor of Sociology from 1933 to 1948. Yet his training was in history and in practical theology.

The tradition of Mennonite social thought, as defined by Redekop and Driedger, was preoccupied with three issues: “the need for community building, the threat of assimilation and the resulting conflict.”<sup>5</sup> Those three issues were surely not peculiar to Mennonites. Rather they represent the nexus of thinking and concern among many distinctive cultural and religious

communities wishing to preserve themselves against an intrusive and dominant culture. They were also the issues that would focus the early work of J. Winfield Fretz and other Mennonite social scientists.

Between 1938 and 1941 Fretz wrote three dissertations at the University of Chicago and the affiliated Chicago Theological Seminary: “Christian Mutual Aid Societies Among Mennonites” (M.A., 1938); “A Study of Mennonite Religious Institutions in Chicago” (B.D., 1940); and “Mennonite Mutual Aid: A Contribution Toward the Establishment of a Christian Community” (Ph.D., 1941).<sup>6</sup> They began an academic trajectory that shaped much of Fretz’s subsequent intellectual work.

All three of these works were essentially descriptive. Fretz did not work as a theoretical sociologist but more like a historian describing social contexts. The linking of specific Mennonite beliefs and patterns with archetypal patterns of other similar groups, so common to sociological writing of the period, was largely eschewed in favor of a more narrative approach.

Fretz’s early works came at a time when Mennonite historians were busily reinterpreting the contours of the Mennonite story. During the 1930s and into the early 1940s Kaufman of Bethel, John Horsch of the Mennonite Publishing House in Scottdale, Harold Bender of Goshen College, C. Henry Smith of Bluffton College, and other scholars were engaging in a spirited

## J. Winfield Fretz and the Early History of Mennonite Sociology

Paul Toews



Winfield at Bethel College,  
ca. 1948

discussion as to the central tenets of Anabaptism and the appropriate narrative for understanding its development over subsequent centuries. That discussion in some ways culminated with the 1944 publication of Bender's now famous essay, "The Anabaptist Vision."<sup>7</sup>

The work of these historians is frequently described as the "recovery of a usable past." It resulted in an ideological reorientation for Mennonites. By redefining the past, they opened up new possibilities for the future. The work of Fretz and what might be termed the sociological recovery was a second phase in this fashioning of a new ideological self-definition. Unlike the historians who focused on the sixteenth-century, the early sociological tradition examined the role of village society as the carrier of Mennonite idealism.

Mennonites in the 1930s and 1940s, due in part to the depression and the Second World War, were at

the front end of a demographic shift that would see a geographical and vocational dispersion of Mennonites far beyond the small towns and agricultural-related pursuits that had dominated the past. What Fretz and other early Mennonite social scientists pondered and investigated was the capacity of Mennonites to take treasured values and practices into new social environments. The opening line of Fretz's second dissertation bluntly stated the issue: "It is a point of interest to many people to notice how the attitudes, the ideals, customs, manners and behavior of an individual undergo changes when he moves from the country to the city, . . . when he changes his cultural and social environment from a rural to an urban one."<sup>8</sup> The implied question was appropriate. Would the movement of Mennonites into the city mean a significant break with past values and traditions? What kind of intentionality was required to maintain those values in the face of the new urban and industrial structures?

For Fretz the practice of mutual aid and the revitalization of rural communities was the intentionality necessary for preservation. Mutual aid had its roots in the Anabaptists' concern to imitate Christ, to reject legal and formal associations, to resist state dependence, and to insist on the right of the individual conscience. Fraternal associations, ordered on the principles of love and peoplehood instead of on legal and coercive regulations, embodied these Anabaptist motifs. The rich history of mutual aid in Mennonite history—Hutterian communalism; Dutch assistance to Swiss Mennonites bound for colonial America; the *Waisenamt* (widows funds that evolved into much more) among Mennonites

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in Russia; various old-age homes, orphanages, and insurance societies of North America—were all demonstrations of the ability of God's people to fashion associational alternatives.<sup>9</sup>

Fretz knew that these institutions and practices were a product of social and historical circumstances. After all, many immigrant groups in American society fashioned similar practices and institutions for mutual support. However, the presence of sociological necessities did not negate theological inspiration. The Mennonite mutual aid societies also embodied a “literal interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount” as well as structuring social life in Mennonite society. In the mutual aid networks people could define their “social status in the community” and “enjoy . . . Christian fellowship.” The societies were instruments of “social solidarity and social cohesion” and tended to mitigate the “great economic and social inequalities within Mennonite communities.”<sup>10</sup> Thus mutual aid was “one of the most important factors . . . [for] determining the character and significance of the Mennonites as a social group.”<sup>11</sup>

Fretz’s sense of the pivotal role of mutual aid was reinforced by the research of a fellow student at Chicago. In 1942, Karl Baehr, a General Conference Mennonite, completed a study of “Secularization Among the Mennonites” of Elkhart County, Indiana. Baehr identified both centripetal and centrifugal forces in the Mennonite universe. Foremost among the centripetal ones—those that held Mennonitism together—were mutual aid and community organization.<sup>12</sup>

The ability of mutual aid and other central qualities of Mennonitism to survive in the city was the subject of Fretz’s second dissertation. The Mennonite story in Chicago probably pre-dates the Civil War. It took institutional form in 1866 with the formation of the first Mennonite church. This group soon faltered and its failure to develop into a strong and continuing fellowship was an omen of things to come. Beginning in 1893 various Mennonite conference groups began what then were called “Home Mission” projects. When Fretz studied Mennonites in Chicago in 1940 there were eight small “mission churches,” all sponsored by different Mennonite groups.

The ability of these small churches to serve as carriers of past values and practices seemed minimal at best. Fretz wrote: “After studying the

Mennonite churches in Chicago one is impressed with the fact that there is so little that is characteristically Mennonite about them.”<sup>13</sup> This was true individually as well as institutionally. In interviews with twenty Mennonites who had moved from rural congregations into the city the “one thing that stand[s] out is the lack of Mennonite-consciousness.”<sup>14</sup> These transplanted Mennonites reflected the social customs, practices and values of the new urban environment. They retained little sense of the “mission or destiny” of the Mennonite church and seemed not to understand that their church had anything “unique, vital and urgent . . . to offer to society.”<sup>15</sup>

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Even worse was the fact that only ten percent of the Mennonites who migrated into the city affiliated with any Mennonite congregation. The conclusion was inescapable:

the discovery of these facts . . . impressed upon me the disruptive influence that a city environment has on Mennonite ideals and teachings and therefore, on the church itself. The urban soil is not the kind of soil in which the Mennonite church can grow. It is literally true that the city soil is too hard, stony and shallow for Mennonite ideals to take root.<sup>16</sup>

Fretz was not alone in articulating this kind of urban fear. Karl Baehr also concluded that Mennonites drifting into urban areas would undoubtedly secularize faster than those remaining in the protective sheath of the more isolated village.<sup>17</sup> Melvin Gingerich, a Mennonite Church (MC) historian teaching at Bethel College, was even more emphatic in a 1942 article: “Our former rural security is disappearing, we are becoming secularized, our community life is breaking down, and our culture is losing its distinctive qualities.”<sup>18</sup>

Guy F. Hershberger, the MC historian and ethicist, shared similar concerns. The church's ability to maintain high "ethical standards" required the social intimacy of "primary groups." Hershberger, buttressing his position with the writings of Charles Horton Cooley, the American sociologist, Henry David Thoreau and others, contended that primary groups were the most effective means for minimizing the "selfish, lustful drives" that reside in all humans. In the closeness of the primary group those baser instincts were throttled. The success of the Mennonite Church was linked to its capacity to retain the characteristics of a primary group. Maintaining the primary group was best done by "keeping the church rooted in the rural soil." While the city offered many differing kinds of social contacts, they were mostly "impersonal and secondary."<sup>19</sup>

Two conferences in the early 1940s gave further voice to fears about the ability of Mennonites to carry their traditions into the urban context. With Fretz taking the lead, the Mennonite students studying in Chicago called a meeting on December 31, 1941 to discuss "Mennonite Sociological Problems." The one-day conference brought together 49 Mennonite educators and

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church leaders. It set in motion the creation of the Conference on Mennonite Cultural Problems which, between 1942 and 1967, met either annually or biannually. For these several decades this was the key inter-Mennonite forum for intellectuals to discuss community problems, secularization, and other sociological trends.<sup>20</sup> A 1945 conference on "Mennonite Community Life" held at Goshen College brought together an eclectic list of participants from various Mennonite conferences. Several of the participants expressed



**Winfield at Bethel College,**  
ca. 1948

positions congruent with this Mennonite fear of the city.<sup>21</sup>

Mennonites were hardly alone in expressing concern about the continuity of historic values and practices in the nation's new urban centers. Fretz and Baehr came to these positions from the milieu of the University of Chicago and the Chicago Theological Seminary. Arthur E. Holt, professor of social ethics at the Seminary, and Robert Park, the preeminent sociologist at the University, no doubt encouraged this kind of analysis. Holt was one of the foremost Protestant educators concerned with sustaining rural churches and with properly equipping ministers for country parishes. Park, in the vein of Hershberger's concern for the maintenance of primary associations, wanted to nurture neighborhoods as the necessary social institution to perpetuate "civic virtue."<sup>22</sup> During the early decades of the twentieth century a host of other social scientists and agencies were looking for ways to revitalize traditional communities amidst the nation's growing urbanization.<sup>23</sup>

The congruence of what Fretz and other Mennonites were observing, and the findings of other analysts, encouraged the development of



## Conference on Mennonite Educational and Cultural Problems

(probably 1959 at Elkhart). Front row, left to right: Aaron Epp, Cornelius Krahn, Melvin Gingerich, John C. Wenger, ?, Harold S. Bender, J. Winfield Fretz, ?, ?. Back row, left to right: William Keeney, ?, Jacob T. Friesen, ?, ?, C. J. Dyck, John Howard Yoder, William Klassen, Robert Kreider, Erland Waltner.

alternatives to this presumed drift to urbanization and its accompanying secularization. Fretz's earliest and perhaps most articulate statement of an alternative came in a 1940 essay entitled "Mennonites and Their Economic Problems." The problems affecting Mennonites were those common to rural America. According to the 1936 Census of Religious Bodies as taken by the United States government, 87 percent of Mennonites were still rural people. The adverse trends affecting agriculture, at least according to Fretz, included mechanization, the growth of large-scale farming, the expanding class of tenant farmers, and ever-increasing unemployment. The specific impact of those trends on Mennonites was that it forced "hundreds of Mennonite young people" to leave the rural areas and seek employment in towns and cities. Based on his study of Chicago, Fretz was sure that "a high percentage of Mennonites who leave the farm and find work in non-agricultural

pursuits are lost to the Mennonite Church."<sup>21</sup> Not only were they lost to church membership, but the "ideals of family life and the ideals of neighborliness and Christian community relationships . . . undergo terrific tensions . . . and in fact are often completely destroyed."<sup>25</sup>

The appropriate response to this distressing reality was for the church to assume responsibility for its unemployed members. The essay's extended excursus through Anabaptist history and theology lead to the conclusion that only a reinvigoration of the principle of "social responsibility" could mitigate the inevitable decline for people leaving rural environments. Concrete action was required, and Fretz proposed that the Mennonites find ways to provide "opportunity for those who wish to live and work in rural communities." A central committee, organized along the lines of Mennonite Central Committee could purchase land and other

necessities that would permit such persons to remain in farming and related occupations. This would be mutual aid at its best. In essence it was a call for American Mennonites to do what the Russian Mennonites had done when faced with a landless population in the mid-century— establish daughter colonies. Only by such aggressive action could the church hope to “eliminate the annual exodus to cities and . . . keep hundreds of young people in the arms of the Mennonite church.”<sup>26</sup>

Fretz was not the only figure to make such a proposal and to articulate the need for formalizing mutual aid in order to counteract new social realities. In 1939 Guy F. Hershberger, concerned about

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labor/management/union issues as people moved into the commercial and industrial labor force, also called for mutual aid or a social security system to save Mennonite communities. The Mennonite Central Committee had lent American Mennonite money to purchase 300,000 acres in Paraguay so Mennonite refugees from the Soviet Union could settle there. Was it not as reasonable, Hershberger asked, for a Mennonite organization to purchase land at home for the aid of “their refugee brethren who are about to flee to the city, or who would like to flee from the city, or who ought to do so?”<sup>27</sup>

On the front edge of the Second World War, Fretz and others could dream about the possibilities of mutual aid as a means of preserving Mennonite communities. The demands of the war, however, put on hold any attempt to carry out such dreams. The practical necessities of the alternative service system left little energy and few dollars to think about rebuilding rural communities and stemming the drift of

Mennonites into the nation’s urban centers.

In the concluding year of the war and the immediate post-war years these dreams of community revitalization and providing rural alternatives to Mennonite young people took two different, yet related forms. In October 1945, at a meeting ironically in Chicago, a few Mennonite leaders—all non-farm—formed the Mennonite Community Association. While Fretz was not on the initial board of directors, he was an ally of the movement. In 1947 the Association began publishing an attractive, slick paper magazine, *The Mennonite Community*. The periodical hoped to foster “stronger Mennonite communities, both rural and semi-urban,” and “the preservation, in these communities of Mennonite principles and the Mennonite way of life.”<sup>28</sup> The assumptions were that the face-to-face village was required for the full integration of Mennonite life and Mennonite faith. The Association wished to invite young people, particularly those returning from Civilian Public Service, to a new adventure in community building.<sup>29</sup>

Fretz’s efforts were more directed toward a different way of perpetuating village society. He focused on the establishment of new rural communities more than the revitalization of old ones. He worked with the Mennonite Aid section of Mennonite Central Committee in the resettlement of refugees from the Soviet Union and in exploring the possibilities and dynamics of colonization. He was a tireless promoter of the possibilities of colonization across the Americas. Colonization was more than just a settlement of individuals, families or small groups. Colonization was the process by which “a group of like-minded people separates from a parent body and transplants itself to a new locality.” It retained an organic connection with the parent body. The colony had a distinctive set of “common interests and ideals” as well as living in a defined geographical area. Mennonite colonies would be organized to perpetuate the distinctives of the tradition. Among their central characteristics would be the practice of mutual aid.<sup>30</sup>

By focusing, in the late 1930s and early 1940s,

on the difficulties of Mennonites transplanting their traditions to the city, the possibilities for planting new communities and revitalizing older communities, J. Winfield Fretz continued many of the preoccupations of earlier Mennonite social thought. That early Mennonite sociology would be largely concerned with rural Mennonites and their preservation was entirely appropriate, considering that Mennonites far into the twentieth century

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were still predominantly a rural people. In refocusing the possibilities of mutual aid and bringing to consciousness its long history among Mennonites, Fretz contributed to the fashioning of a usable past. American Mennonites, in the years following the Second World War, added another significant chapter to that story of mutual aid. In asking Mennonites to think about the meaning of moving from the seclusive and even somewhat segregated living patterns of the past to the pluralism and interactions of the city, Fretz and other social analysts performed a valuable service. It takes intentionality to preserve traditions and practices in new social environments. Today this early sociological fear of the city may seem quaint. Urban Mennonites today are not prone to take Fretz’s advice to flee the city if they wish to preserve the strengths of the Anabaptist-Mennonite story. Yet the history of Mennonites in Chicago, Philadelphia, New York, and other American urban centers is the story of a large diaspora that is not entirely unlike what Fretz foresaw in 1940.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Volume XIII of *Mennonite Quarterly Review* carried two articles by Fretz: “Mutual Aid Among Mennonites, I,” (January 1939):28-58; “Mutual Aid Among Mennonites, II: Mutual Aid Activities in a Single Mennonite Community,” (July 1939):187-209.

<sup>2</sup>Fretz actually submitted his 1941 Ph.D. dissertation to the Divinity School at the University of Chicago yet his training was with sociologists.

<sup>3</sup>Leo Driedger and Calvin Redekop, “Sociology of Mennonites: State of the Art and Science,” (a paper presented to The State of the Art of Mennonite Studies in North America Conference, University of Toronto, June, 1982), p. 1.

<sup>4</sup>Edmund G. Kaufman, *The Development of the Missionary and Philanthropic Interest Among the Mennonites of North America* (Berne, IN: The Mennonite Book Concern, 1931). On Kaufman see James C. Juhnke, *Creative Crusader: Edmund G. Kaufman and Mennonite Community*. Cornelius H. Wedel Historical Series, no. 8 (North Newton, KS: Bethel College, 1994); James Juhnke and Leo Driedger, “Balancing Community and Outreach Visions: Edmund George Kaufman, Mennonite Sociologist,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* LXVIII (July 1994):396-417.

<sup>5</sup>Driedger/Redekop, “Sociology of Mennonites,” p. 3.

<sup>6</sup>“Christian Mutual Aid Societies Among the Mennonites,” (M.A. dissertation, Divinity School, University of Chicago, June 1938); “A Study of Mennonite Religious Institutions in Chicago,” (B.D. dissertation, Chicago Theological Seminary, June 1940); “Mennonite Mutual Aid a Contribution Toward the Establishment of a Christian Community,” (Ph. D. dissertation, Divinity School, University of Chicago, December 1941).

<sup>7</sup>I have briefly covered some of those discussions in *Mennonites in American Society, 1930-1970: Modernity and the Persistence of Religious Community*. Mennonite Experience in America, vol. 4. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1996) chapter 4. For a more extensive discussion consult Rodney James Sawatsky, “History and Ideology: American Mennonite Identity Definition Through History,” (Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton University, 1977).

<sup>8</sup>Fretz, “A Study of Mennonite Religious Institutions in Chicago,” p. ii.

<sup>9</sup>Fretz, “Mutual Aid Among Mennonites, I,” pp. 32-58.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 31, 58.

<sup>11</sup>Fretz, “Mennonite Mutual Aid a Contribution Toward the Establishment of a Christian Community,” p. 220.

<sup>12</sup>Karl Baehr, “Secularization Among the Mennonites,” (B.D. thesis, University of Chicago, 1942), iii, 150.

<sup>13</sup>Fretz, “A Study of Mennonite Religious Institutions in Chicago,” p. 171.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 162.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 162-163.

<sup>16</sup>J. Winfield Fretz, “Mennonites and Their Economic Problems,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 14 (October, 1940):201.

<sup>17</sup>Baehr, “Secularization Among the Mennonites,” p. 150.

<sup>18</sup>Melvin Gingerich, “Rural Life Problems and the Mennonites,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 16 (July 1942):169.

<sup>19</sup>Guy F. Hershberger, “Maintaining the Mennonite Rural Community,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 14 (October 1940). Quotes are from pages 216, 218, 219.

<sup>20</sup>“Program of Conference on Mennonite Sociology,” printed in *Proceedings of the First Conference on Mennonite Cultural Problems* (1942), pp. 96-98.

<sup>21</sup>See papers published in *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 19 (April 1945).

<sup>22</sup>See my forthcoming essay "The American Mennonite Search For A Useable Past: From The Declensive To The Ironic Interpretation" in *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 73 (July 1999) for a fuller analysis of the role of the University of Chicago in the development of these themes in Mennonite ideation.

<sup>23</sup>See William L. Bowers, *The Country Life Movement in America, 1900-1920* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press Corp., 1974); Merwin Swanson, "The 'Country Life Movement' and the American Churches," *Church History* 46 (September 1977): 358-373; Jacob H. Dorn, "The Rural Ideal and Agrarian Realities: Arthur E. Holt and the Vision of a Decentralized America in the Inter-War Years," *Church History* 52 (March 1983):50-65.

<sup>24</sup>J. Winfield Fretz, "Mennonites and their Economic Problems," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 14 (October 1940): 195-199. Quote is from p. 199.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 201.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 209-213. Quotes are on p. 209 and 213.

<sup>27</sup>Guy F. Hershberger, "Nonresistance and Industrial

Conflict," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 13 (April 1939):154.

<sup>28</sup>Paul Erb, "A VISION and Its Realization," *The Mennonite Community* 1 (January 1947):10.

<sup>29</sup>Guy F. Hershberger, "Appreciating THE MENNONITE COMMUNITY," *The Mennonite Community* 1 (January 1947):6-7.

<sup>30</sup>J. Winfield Fretz, "Factors Contributing to Success and Failure in Mennonite Colonization," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 24 (April 1950):130-135. Quote is on page 130. Other writings by Fretz that focus on this theme include: "Recent Mennonite Community Building in Canada," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 18 (January 1944):5-21; *Mennonite Colonization: Lessons From the Past For The Future* (Akron, PA: Mennonite Central Committee, 1944); *Mennonite Colonization in Mexico: An Introduction* (Akron, PA: Mennonite Central Committee, 1945); *Pilgrims in Paraguay: The Story of Mennonite Colonization in South America* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1953); *Immigrant Group Settlements in Paraguay: A Study in the Sociology of Colonization* (North Newton, KS: Bethel College, 1962).