

Women's History and Mennonite Archives

by **MARLENE EPP***

Religious archives hold much potential for research on women of the past. Even if they were involved in no other activity outside the home, most women participated in church life at some level. Through regular attendance and fundraising, women were the backbone of a functioning church, and in the context of Sunday school and the home were also the primary transmitters of religious traditions to the next generation. As both church historians and scholars of secular history increase their interest in women's studies, one expects that administrators of religious archives will realize the potential which exists in their collections.

Working in religious archives presents some problems to an historian of women. Religious archives tend to have an institutional orientation, collecting the records of organizations, of committees, of churches, and of the individuals at the helm of those structures. Institutional records are not very illuminating because committees were, until recently, dominated by men, and thus did not speak for women and did not address issues of special concern to women. For example, there is extensive documentation of Mennonite efforts to obtain military exemption for their young men during the Second World War, but almost nothing which describes the experiences of the wives and families of men who left home to work in alternative service camps.¹ On the other hand, there are such examples as an all-male committee appointed by the Mennonite Conference of Ontario in 1944 to examine the issue of birth control! In order to discern the place of women in the "official" church, one must therefore learn to read between the lines. Since women have only recently entered positions of administrative and ecclesiastical importance in Mennonite churches, there are very few collected personal papers of women. However, the papers of well-known churchmen occasionally reveal valuable information about women in their own families or about the prevailing attitudes in the church towards women. It is necessary to sift through such material with an eye for the presence of women.

In addition, within the Mennonite church, as is the case in most other denominations, a parallel but unofficial church exists in the form of women's organizations. The records of missionary societies or sewing circles constitute one of the most obvious sources in church archives for research on women. Unless they include correspondence between women in the organizations, however, these records frequently offer little more than financial accounts and lists of items sewn, knit, and bundled. This information provides

details of the activities of the women's group, but does not reveal the conversations which occurred over the quilting frame, or the place which these meetings held in women's lives. Other sources suggest that sewing circles offered some women their only channel for spiritual expression. It was in this context that women not only "ministered" to those in need by making clothing but were also "ministered to" by other women in the group. Because the official church rarely had occasion to deal with this parallel women's church, there is little in archival records which provides insight into the relationship.

Despite the paucity of archival sources on Mennonite women, research has proceeded at a brisk pace in recent years. Four biographical collections on Mennonite women have been published since 1978,² as well as a variety of articles. In 1985, several Mennonite organizations collaborated to publish the translated and edited diary of a young Russian Mennonite woman, parts of which were written on the backs of labels of relief shipments sent from North America.³ Archivists and historians alike are recognizing the gaps in Mennonite historiography which deals with women's experience and are beginning to take steps to correct the imbalance.⁴ A brief look at areas of contemporary research may help to reveal the potential for women's history in church archives.

Mennonites are known as a rural people, and indeed throughout their history have based their livelihood primarily on agriculture or farm-related business. The period following the Second World War has generally been considered to be a turning point during which Mennonites moved into cities at a rapid pace. A significant phenomenon in the urbanization of Mennonites, however, began two decades earlier, when the twenty thousand Mennonites who emigrated from the Soviet Union to Canada during the 1920s owed large transportation debts to the Canadian Pacific Railway. In order to repay these debts and to help establish themselves economically in a new country, many of these newcomers sent their daughters to cities to work as domestic servants. Fearful for these young women in an alien and highly-suspicious environment, the Mennonites established "girls' homes" in four cities, Winnipeg, Saskatoon, Calgary, and Vancouver.

The homes, several of which existed until the late 1950s, served a number of purposes. Since most of the women were live-in domestics, the homes were temporary residences while a woman was between jobs or looking for work. The homes acted as a social and spiritual network, where women could meet on their days off work for visiting and for Bible study with a local Mennonite minister. The homes also served as employment bureaus where women could be linked with employers under the scrutiny of the matrons of the homes.

Until recently, little was known about the girls' homes except for the information which existed in the memories of the thousands of Mennonite women who had benefited from their existence. In 1987, however, the Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies in Winnipeg sponsored an oral history project, in which researcher Frieda Esau interviewed thirty-four women connected with either of the two girls' homes in Winnipeg.⁵ These interviews proved to be a valuable resource, providing not only some of the operational details of the homes but also insight into the actual experience of the women as domestic servants.⁶ Given the facts that there are virtually no institutional records and that the prominent figures left few personal papers, these interviews represent an invaluable archival source of information.

Another subject in which oral history could play a role is the emigration of approximately eight thousand "displaced" Mennonites from war-torn Europe to

Canada after the Second World War. Among the Mennonites who arrived in Canada during that period were family units largely composed of mothers, aunts, children, and grandmothers. There is at present little documentation about the experiences of these women as they fled from the Soviet Union, survived as refugees in Europe for several years, and then arrived in Canada.⁷ Although the collected papers of the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization document the administrative aspects of immigration and relief,⁸ these records need to be supplemented by information in diaries, should they exist, and by the memories of women. The new arrivals added significant numbers to the membership of some urban Mennonite churches and created unique problems, such as the question of whether to allow remarriage if the fate of a woman's husband were unknown. Moreover, some churches were compelled to grant wider rights to women, such as the right to vote at meetings, because of the presence of so many households which were headed by women.

The uncovering of more information will require innovative approaches by both archivists and historians. Oral history projects are an obvious means of acquiring women's stories. Questionnaires, used more often by social scientists than by historians, can be valuable for surveying specific topics; one graduate student doing research on Mennonite women's organizations in Canada obtained an eighty per cent return on several hundred questionnaires sent to these groups, a positive sign that women are willing to tell their stories. Photographs are a useful source for examining topics such as fashion which are relevant to women. Particularly in the case of those Mennonites of Swiss origin for whom plain dress has at various times been an indicator of right faith and right living, photographs can assist in interpreting the theology of a group in a given era.⁹ Yet another non-traditional source is the recipe book, because of the fact that cooking has been an important aspect of culture among Mennonites. Religious periodicals can also be helpful in the study of women, because writing was one of the few acceptable vehicles for female expression in the church; although many of the Mennonite newspapers contain devotional articles, mission reports, and even theological treatises by women, the search for such material in periodicals which remain unindexed can be time-consuming.

By cataloguing traditional sources and by being aware of non-traditional sources, archivists have the opportunity to contribute substantially to furthering the study of women's history in a religious context.

Notes

- * This writer's experience with integrating church history and women's history comes from two directions. First, as a researcher for the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada, she has participated for several years in the writing of the third volume of the history of Mennonites in Canada. This project, currently under the direction of Dr. Ted Regehr of the University of Saskatchewan, will analyze the Mennonite experience from the outbreak of the Second World War to approximately 1970. The first two volumes, authored by the late Dr. Frank H. Epp, were *Mennonites in Canada: 1786-1920: The History of a Separate People* (Toronto, 1974), and *Mennonites in Canada, 1920-1940: A People's Struggle for Survival* (Toronto, 1982). There are three major archives in Canada which represent different Mennonite conference groups: the Mennonite Heritage Centre in Winnipeg (Conference of Mennonites in Canada); the Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies in Winnipeg (Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches); and the Conrad Grebel College Archives in Waterloo (Mennonite Conference of Eastern Canada). There are also several smaller Mennonite archives, mostly in western Canada.

- 1 Letters from men in alternative service camps to the ministers of their home churches indicate that economic hardship particularly affected young families who were without their primary provider for up to two years.

- 2 Mary Lou Cummings, *Full Circle: Stories of Mennonite Women* (Newton, Kan., 1978); Katie Funk Wiebe, *Women Among the Brethren: Stories of 15 Mennonite Brethren and Krimmer Mennonite Brethren Women* (Hillsboro, Kan., 1979); Elaine Sommers Rich, *Mennonite Women: A Story of God's Faithfulness, 1783-1983* (Scottsdale, Penn., 1983); Ruth Unrau, *Encircled: Stories of Mennonite Women* (Newton, Kan., 1986). A biographical collection on Ontario Mennonite women of Swiss origin is currently in progress.
- 3 Gerald Peters, trans. and ed., *Diary of Anna Baerg, 1916-1924* (Winnipeg, 1985).
- 4 A recent inventory on archival holdings of the Mennonite Heritage Centre attempts to point to institutional collections which have information useful to the researcher interested in women's studies. Although the inventory cites fifty-six collections of personal papers, only five relatively small collections are actually those of women. See *Resources for Canadian Mennonite Studies: An Inventory and Guide to Archival Holdings at the Mennonite Heritage Centre* (Winnipeg, 1988).
- 5 The two homes were Ebenezer Girls' Home and Mary-Martha Girls' Home.
- 6 See Marlene Epp, "The Mennonite Girls' Homes of Winnipeg: A Home Away from Home," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 6 (1988), pp. 100-114. See also Frieda Esau Klippenstein, "Doing What We Could': Mennonite Domestic Servants in Winnipeg, 1920s to 1950s," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 7 (1989), pp. 145-166.
- 7 Some useful published sources exist, such as fictionalized accounts and personal memoirs. See, for instance, Gerhard Lohrenz, *The Lost Generation and Other Stories* (Winnipeg, 1982); and Susanna Toews, *Trek to Freedom: The Escape of Two Sisters from South Russia during World War II* (Winkler, Man., 1976).
- 8 The records of this defunct organization are at the Mennonite Heritage Centre in Winnipeg.
- 9 A project which is currently identifying and cataloguing several thousand photographs at the Conrad Grebel College Archives will be useful in this respect.