



Mile 146

Summer - 2017



Volume 10

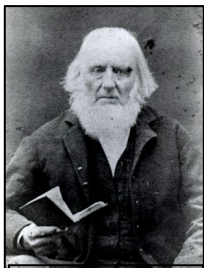
Topeka Area Historical Society

Number 3

“Maple Grove Church”

When you think about a church with Amish-Mennonite roots, what generally comes to mind is a congregation that is very conservative in dress and traditional in their faith. But that stereotype doesn't fit the congregation that meets on South Main Street in Topeka. While they began as an Amish Mennonite church, Maple Grove's 163 year history demonstrates that they have never been afraid to try a new avenue of ministry. Maple Grove was the first Mennonite church in Northern Indiana to have Sunday School beginning in 1868. They hosted a huge Sunday School Conference in 1928, started an annual Summer Bible School in 1938, and in 1971 were the first area church to have a bus ministry.

In May of 1854, with the help of Bishop Isaac Smucker (originally spelled Schmucker), eighteen charter members gathered southwest of Topeka in the home of Jonathan E. Yoder to form the Maple Grove Amish Mennonite Church.

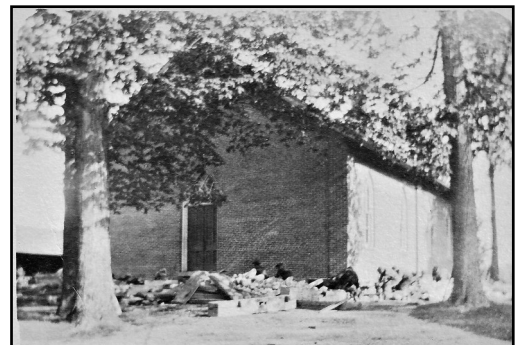


Isaac Smucker

For the first few years the services were held in homes. Up until 1882, nearly all the services were conducted in German.

The congregation's first frame meetinghouse (30 x 50) was built in 1856, on the LaGrange-Noble county line one mile south of Topeka and a quarter mile west. The first service in the building took place on September 18, 1856. There were actually two entrances on opposite sides of the pulpit, one for men and one for women. Initially the group only met for worship services, but in the spring of 1868, they also began holding Sunday School. George Boller, a deacon in the church, was the first superintendent. All of the classes were held in various sections of the main auditorium. According to Maple Grove's 100th Anniversary (1854-1954) history (often referred to as the Blue Booklet), “about 1890 evening meetings, such as Evangelistic services and Young People's Meetings were begun.”

The frame meetinghouse was replaced with a brick structure at the same site in 1879, with seating for 300 and built at a cost of \$2,000. Unlike the previous one, the new brick building only had one entrance. The original frame building was moved one mile north of Topeka by the Star Literary Society to what was known at the time as Sycamore Corners, so named because of a large sycamore tree at that location. The literary society changed their name to the Sycamore Literary Society and used the frame building until the completion of the first Sycamore Hall built in 1905. The frame structure was later moved into town where it served as a storage building on the west end of T.O. Nelson's garage.



The first service in the new building was held on January 11, 1890. However, the formal dedication was two weeks later on January 25th, with services Sunday forenoon and evening. John F. Funk, a prominent leader and considered by many as the father of Mennonite publishing, spoke for the services conducted in English. Monday forenoon there was another service; this one was in German.



Sunday School Conference, 1928

The church continued to grow and so did their need for space. In 1915 the brick building was raised four feet and a full basement was constructed to be used primarily for Sunday School. That

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summer, while construction was taking place, church services were held three miles to the east in the Independence Church (a Sunday School Maple Grove had started).

Unfortunately in 1924, a split occurred within the congregation. Some say it stemmed from, unrest within the Indiana-Michigan Mennonite Conference with whom Maple Grove had affiliated. Others maintain that the division came over the desire to use musical instruments in the church service. The real issues have long since faded with the passing of time.

The result was a bitter split and the faction that controlled the finances claimed ownership of the building and joined the Central Conference (of the General Conference Mennonite Church) in 1927. They would eventually sell the building and join the Topeka Mennonite Church in 1930. But, for a period of time there were three Mennonite churches in Topeka. The old brick church sat empty for many years before Gary and Sherry Lambright purchased the property. The remodeled structure is now their home.

The group that remained with the Indiana-Michigan Conference, was without a building. Services were conducted in the home of minister Jonathan Kurtz and others until a 36 x 52 foot building, with a full basement, on South Main was completed. The group financed the construction by borrowing \$15,000 from the Indiana-Michigan Conference.

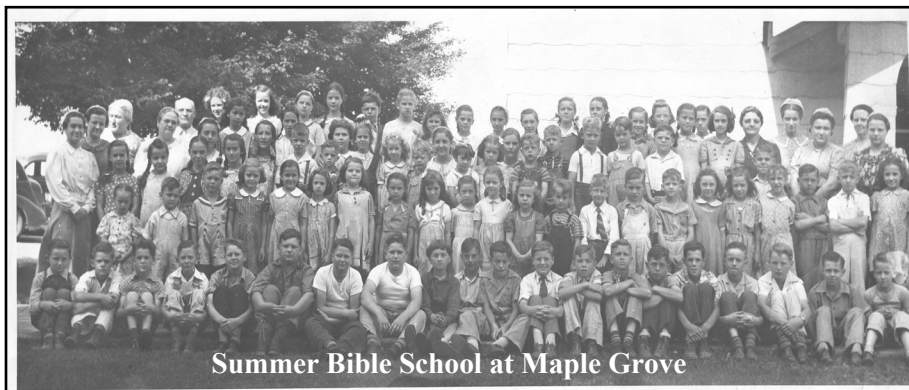
According to Maple Grove's 1954 centennial history, about 400 people attended the May 24, 1925, dedication. Among the speakers were P.A. Heller, Ft. Wayne; J.S. Hartzler, Elkhart; C.L. Graber, Goshen; and John F. Funk who had also spoken at the dedication of the brick church 45 years earlier.

It's here that history takes an interesting as well as redemptive twist. When Jonathan E. Yoder (who had helped to form Maple Grove) died in 1922, he left \$25,000 to Maple Grove and \$25,000 to Topeka Mennonite where his wife Rebecca (who died in 1914) had been a member. When the split occurred in 1924, the group who had claimed the building also kept all the money.

To their credit, and whatever their motivation, in a spirit of brotherhood they gave \$15,000 to the congregation on South Main Street. And the Maple Grove Church was immediately able to pay back the Conference.

Edwin J. Yoder (THS Class of 1908) was ordained as minister at Maple Grove in 1925. Ten years later he was made bishop. He would serve the congregation until 1960. Viewed by some as very strict, Yoder's leadership proved to be almost ahead of his time.

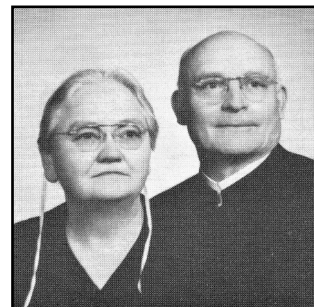
In the early months of 1938, a number of people expressed a desire to host a "Summer Bible School" which was a new idea at the time. Bishop Yoder called a meeting of church leaders and, following some discussion, plans were set for Spring. With the help of Newton Weber of Ft. Wayne, Maple Grove's first Summer



Summer Bible School at Maple Grove

Bible School was held May 16-27, 1938. Thirteen teachers taught the 151 children who attended. Their missions offering totaled \$15.30, which is amazing given the fact that it was during the height of the Great Depression. Expenses came to \$47.29.

For next sixty or seventy years Maple Grove was host as the Topeka churches came together to put on the annual Vacation Bible School.



Mary & Edwin J. Yoder

Another visionary Maple Grove pastor was Joe Swartz. His evangelistic fervor sparked a new wave of growth with the launching of a bus ministry in 1971. Hundreds of children and a few adults were picked up by buses and brought to church from surrounding communities like Ligonier, Wolcottville, and Rome City. Church attendance soared to over 500 people. That growth led to the construction of a spacious fellowship hall in 1973.

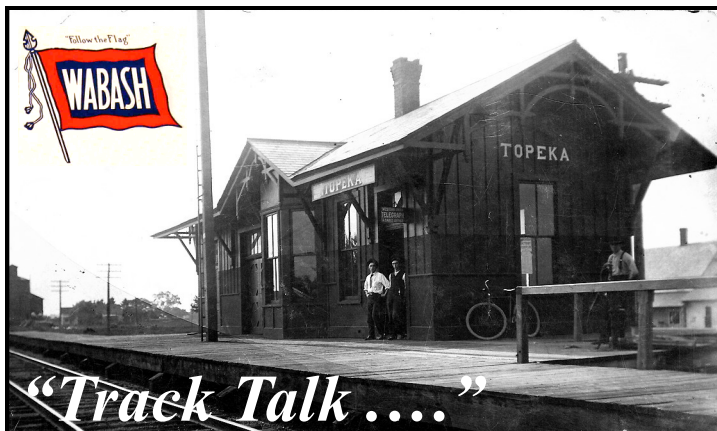
Frustrated over the liberal direction of the denomination's theology and colleges, Maple Grove withdrew from the Indiana-Michigan Conference in December of 1996 and became an independent congregation.

The congregation experienced a significant crisis of leadership beginning in 2007. Over the next several years several area ministers came alongside Maple Grove's Elders by taking turns filling the pulpit and doing hospital visitation. One of those pastors, Barry St. Clair, became Maple Grove's pastor and served the church for several years before failing health forced him to retire.

Today the Maple Grove Church is pastored by Jason Gingerich who attended there as a boy. Once again the church is experiencing new life and vitality as they look to the future. **HG**



- Answers:
- (1) May of 1854
 - (2) Isaac Smucker
 - (3) Jonathan E. Yoder
 - (4) Irvin Hookey
 - (5) Mississippi



Kenny Frain Exhibit

We are honored that the family of Pfc. Kenny Frain, the only Topeka soldier to die in the Vietnam War, has graciously donated a number of things to the Depot Museum.



Among those items are a beautiful restored photo of Kenny taken shortly after he was deployed, along with his military medals, the flag that was presented to the family at his funeral, and a rubbing of his name taken from the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C.

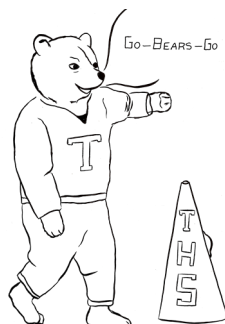


Kenny's division arrived in Vietnam on January 14, 1969. The following March 11th, he died a hero saving members of his platoon.

The Depot To Closes in October

The historical society's Depot Museum will be closing for the season at the end of September. September 30th will be the final Saturday morning that the Depot will be open until next Spring.

Admission is FREE and there are lots of things to see. And a visit to the Depot is a great way for you and your family to spend a Saturday morning. Plus, every kid loves climbing into our genuine Wabash Railroad caboose.



The Mile 146 Quiz:

1. When did the Maple Grove Church begin?
2. Who was the first Maple Grove minister?
3. Who left \$25,000 to both Maple Grove and Topeka Mennonite?
4. Who managed the Topeka tomato cannery?
5. Kathleen Watson was a native of what state?

Coming Events:

Sept. 19, 2017 Sharla Thompson
The Daughters of the American Revolution

Nov. 14, 2017 Annual Dinner Meeting
Program to be announced

Topeka Area Historical Society Meetings are held
at the Topeka Branch Library - 6:30 PM
Everyone is welcome

Visit us online at: www.topekahistoricalsociety.com



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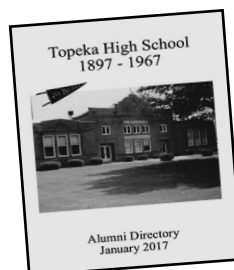
THS Alumni Directory

We still have copies of the final edition of the Topeka High School Alumni Directory that are available for purchase. The cost is only \$10.00 (plus \$5.00 shipping) for what is sure to become a collector's item.

This 116 page spiral bound volume is filled with the name of each graduate, numerous class photos, and other special features that celebrate the 70 year history of Topeka High School.

Order your copy from:

Topeka Area Historical Society
P.O. Box 33
Topeka, Indiana 46571



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The Hawpatch History Detective

Tomato Cannerywhere was it?

We have a new mystery on our hands. Where was this tomato cannery? Who owned it? How long was it in operation? Inquiring minds want to know!

All we know is the information on the back of this postcard. It says that Irvin Hooley (THS Class of 1898) was the manager. He is the one in the dark shirt standing on the right by the post. And, "Yes!" we know, it looks like he's checking his cell phone!



The back the photo also says that Lela Lantz Hooley (THS Class of 1909) worked there as did her husband Cletus (THS Class of 1904).

Any additional information you might have will be greatly appreciated.

Aunt Kat's Last Switchboard Call

Thanks to Tommy Stoltz, we know about the last phone call made from the old Topeka telephone switchboard before the system was automated. His aunt, Kathleen Watson (a sister to Anne Stoltz and Lynette Slabach), was operating the board that night.

Regrettably we failed to include Kat among the list of operators in the Spring 2016 newsletter article "Number, Number Please". But Tommy sent us two great stories.

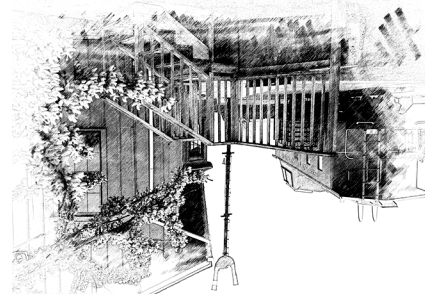
"On the night of May 31 - June 1, 1969, Aunt Kat called me at 11:55pm and we carried on a conversation till midnight. At the time we hung up the switch was flipped and the automated system took over. Kat lost her job several weeks later.

It might just be us old timers who remember the summer nights when the young guys would park their cars in front of Yoder Oil Co, across the street from the telephone office. They would turn up their radios, sit on the hoods of their cars, and listen to rock and roll. When a call was placed with Kat to the Sheriff's office in LaGrange complaining about the loud music, it was ironic that the light outside by the front door always came on. At that point all cars would scatter and by the time the police car rolled down Main Street the only sound they could hear was the sound of crickets' chirping. After all ... she was a rebel!"

A big hearted Mississippi native, Kat never knew a stranger. And, she was never shy about declaring her southern sympathies. When Kat said, "The South's gonna rise again", she *really* meant it! *HG*



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