

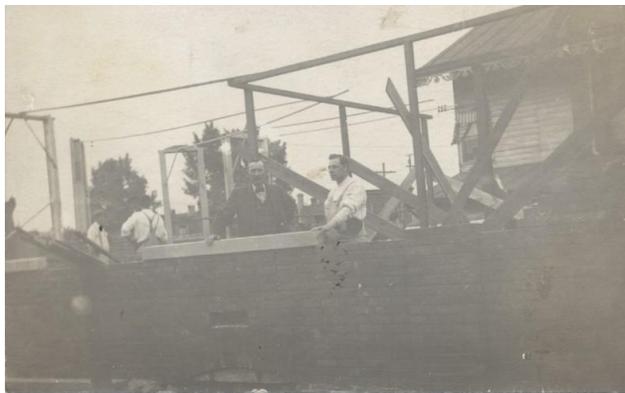
The Historical Society
The Bible Fellowship Church
April, 2016

When the time for the Annual Conference (now called the Bible Fellowship Conference officially), I go looking for articles and information that relate to previous conferences. You can think of this as the conference issue.

The first article was written as a summary for the 1916 conference which was held in Philadelphia. Some great pictures of the church are reprinted here. The second article is actually a newspaper article about the 1896 conference. Minutes are business like and to the point. I find occasional articles by reporters who visited the conference and give their observations. They add some color to black and white minutes. This article might even shock you. The third is a brief biography of one of our preachers which began with a mistake.

About 40 miles as the crow flies - the distance from Zionsville to Philadelphia. But Zionsville and Philadelphia were worlds apart in 1916. Zionsville - a sleepy village surrounded by well cultivated farms. Philadelphia - a bustling metropolitan complex of intersecting streets. Different worlds.

So what was this church, the Mennonite Brethren in Christ, with its simple lifestyle and rural values, birthed in Zionsville, doing in Metropolis? The 1915 Conference which met in Royersford determined they would meet there in 1916 probably because the church building on Goodman Street was new and they liked to showcase new facilities. The pastor was a former carpenter, F. M. Hottel, who led in building both the physical church and the spiritual church.



Philadelphia Church Construction - FM Hottel center in working clothes

It was the first time the conference met in Philadelphia. Only one other conference would be held there, 6 years later, in 1922. The call to share the Gospel had led to

Philadelphia sometime in 1902. Germantown was the first point of contact. Normally, some sort of networking had taken place when a mission began. Someone had talked to someone. No well-defined strategy of expansion seemed to exist beyond the desire to preach whenever and wherever they could. For years the church had been reaching farther and farther. City ministry was, in one sense, not a new development. They had gone into urban surroundings in places like Reading, Allentown and Bethlehem. The evangelistic Gospel Workers were still focused on villages and had even crossed the river into small towns in New Jersey. But Philadelphia must have felt like a new mission field.



Philadelphia Church - nearing completion

One of the original families in the city was the Samuel S. Geil family. Geil's wife, Susan, came first but her husband soon joined what was happening over 10 years earlier. In 1916, the 58 year old S. S. (Pappy) Geil was the delegate of the Philadelphia congregation. Pappy Geil was remembered for his enthusiastic responses at camp meetings. When he was not delegate, he was a produce salesman near his Goodman Street home. The Geils lived not far from the new church building.



Completed Church and Sexton House

S. S. Geil was just one of the non-clergy delegates who attended the conference. The picture they took shows the preachers front and center with lay leaders in the background. It was not an accident nor was it a deliberate snub: the preachers were the important guys, or so it was thought. They were the heart of the work. Laymen played the role of supporters. There was a gulf between the ordained men and the lay leaders. Preachers were never called by their first name – initials only. At Mizpah Grove, the preachers had their own dining area as though they did not mix with



common folk. The laymen put preachers on a pedestal. Much was expected from men

1916 Annual Conference

in the ministry, and from their families.

Perhaps, the laymen were not given the credit they deserved. They took off from work losing 3 or 4 days wages. George K. Himmelreich from the Fleetwood / Blandon Circuit was a puddler by trade, working at a steel mill pouring molten iron. Herbert E. Gehman from Coopersburg was a clerk in a hardware store. Allen Gehman was a farmer from Macungie. He was perhaps a bit special because he was the son of William Gehman. He stood in the back row behind his little brother, Will (W. G. Gehman) who was now leading the work of the Gospel Heralds. Charles W. Teel from Easton worked as a plasterer. Morris E. Brownback labored as a moulder at a steel mill. They came. They prayed. They listened. They voted. They were noted. The Resolutions Committee offered the following in their behalf:

WHEREAS, The various Classes have elected and sent to this Annual Conference as delegates such noble, interested and spiritual men, and,

WHEREAS, The different delegates took such a deep interest in the deliberations of the Conference, being wide awake, active and alive in every matter presented to the Conference, therefore,
Resolved, That we encourage the Classes to continue to elect such men as delegates from time to time, and further,
Resolved, That we highly appreciate the interest of the different delegates in the work of the Lord and pray God to bless them abundantly and to make them a great blessing in their respective Classes.

The conference began on Thursday but the preachers had come a day earlier for the Ministerial Convention. Since it was a convention, they kept and reviewed minutes, had a roll call and appointed committees. That said, the convention was not about business but about being challenged and learning. So essays “were read, discussed and adopted.” “Pastor’s Proper Utilization of Time” and “Present Day Dangers Confronting Pastors and Workers” were their titles. On that Wednesday evening, the meetings were opened to anyone and the following messages were presented: “Exploits of Faith;” “Effectual Prayer;” and “The Pastor’s Growth in Spiritual Knowledge as Manifested According to 1 Tim. 4:15.” It was noted that “the church was filled with eager listeners to the messages from the Lord...”

At 8:00am the next morning, they were at their places ready to go. The conference opened in the usual fashion – with a sermon by the chairman. H. B. Musselman “gave us a very appropriate and needful address concerning the importance of our gathering together and the business to be transacted.” Secretary C. H. Brunner began scratching notes of the proceedings. The roll was called. Forty-five were in attendance. Committees were appointed and committees reported. The death of M. W. Ettinger, one of the preachers who was killed in a collision between a trolley and a car, was noted. And so they continued their business with morning and afternoon meetings until Saturday. They would lodge overnight with one of the Philadelphia families who warmly welcomed them and did their best to make them comfortable.

They all looked forward to Sunday when the entire day was given to preaching. The church could not house the attendees so arrangements had been made to hold the meetings in the Drury Theatre at Thirteenth and Tioga Streets. H. B. Musselman led off at 9:30am with a sermon from 1 Corinthians 4:1. “The sermon was a clear and forceful description of a Pastor’s Call, Mission, and Obligations as a Minister and Steward of Christ. We are certain that this sermon will work effectually in the life of every Pastor.” W. G. Gehman followed at 2:30pm with the ordination sermon. “The sermon was very practical, setting forth the need of the Pastor being in constant touch with God.” At 7:30pm, they were back again with an “inspiring song service” followed by a sermon from C. H. Brunner on “Dangers Confronting the Christian,” “The sermon was full of vital

and practical truths as well as instruction and inspiration. It was delivered in a forceful and earnest manner.” It was noted that a Female Quartette and the Preachers’ Quartette gave “a number of very excellent selections.”

On Monday morning they returned to their business. Monday afternoon brought the end of their work whereupon they said their goodbyes and left for the train station to return to their homes. The preachers had all been reassigned to their previous charge so they were spared the task of packing and moving for another year. Another year lay ahead. The delegates were eager to get home and perhaps back to work. The preachers were eager to return to their work of preaching and pastoring.

The church building on Goodman Street is now a parking lot. The congregational descendants are found in the Maple Glen Church. Drury Theatre is gone, swallowed up by Temple University. And the 1916 Conference is history.

The Annual Conference of 1896 began Friday morning, February 7, at the Liberty Street Evangelical Church. The minutes record Wilson Steinmetz opening the afternoon session with singing and prayer but records that W. B. Musselman preached at the beginning of the conference in the morning. Perhaps the unknown observer got his notes a bit mixed.

Now They All Shout

Mennonites Did Not Used to Believe in Loud Amens

But They Have Progressed Rapidly

There are no Cuspidores in the Pulpit Now and no Plugs in the Pastor’s Pocket – No Circuses for the Pious Mennonites

The Mennonite Conference in Zion Evangelical Church adjourned after an interesting session last night. The evening session opened with singing and prayer led by Wilson Steinmetz, of Coopersburg.

Elder H. B. Musselman, of Lehighton, read an essay on “Church factions, their cause, effect and cure.” He said they were caused by pride, conceit and selfesteem. He said that in the time of Moses rebellious factionists were punished with death and that would be a good cure for them in these days.

This sanguinary churchman's remarkable ideas of a cure were equaled by a very interesting address in the afternoon on "The general progress of the Pennsylvania Conference" by Presiding Elder W. B. Musselman, of Terre Hill. In the course of his address he said "We should not boast of the church as our church, our school, our property or our institution. This nearly always proves destructive. True progress does not always consist in building many churches or securing new members. Progress is made first in regard to doctrine. Some year ago we, the church, did not allow shouting or praising the Lord aloud in our worship, and if one did shout he was privately advised by some old brother to keep quiet. Now all believe in shouting.

"Years ago we did not believe it was possible to be free from sin entirely in this world. A salvation is not preached of a full deliverance from sin in the world. Years ago our preachers did not travel: now none are accepted unless they are giving themselves unconditionally to go into the conference.

"Our church did not believe in missions. Five years ago the foreign missionary collections were \$22. This year it will sum up nearly \$600. The home missions five years ago was \$69, this year \$1400. In 1881 we had 200 members, and in seven years it doubled itself and has almost doubled itself now. Many years ago, say 20, our preachers received family tickets and took the entire family to the show: now you couldn't persuade one of our members to go.

"The time is past in our church when we have cuspidors on the pulpit. The ministers then almost all used tobacco as well as members. Now we have no members, class leaders, Sunday School superintendent or deacons in the entire church that use tobacco. One time we were opposed to the doctrine of entire sanctification and opposed all who confessed it. Now we preach that doctrine and our members are consecrated. The church is now in perfect harmony. Not a single jar among the ministers and the future looks bright and glorious."

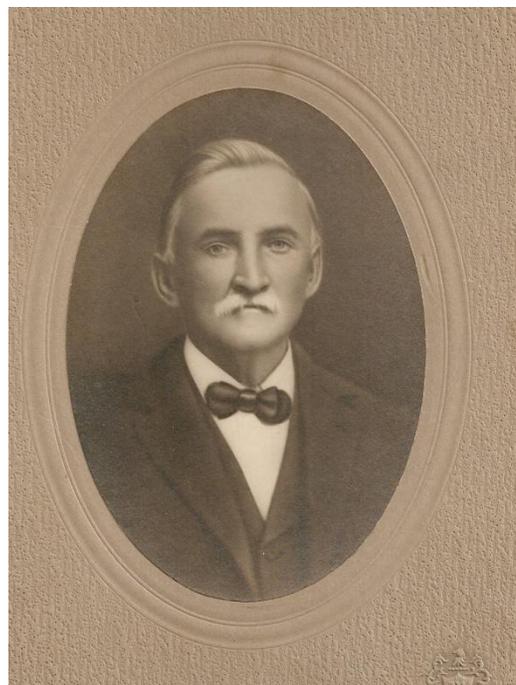


W. B. Musselman

[The Allentown Leader, February 7, 1896, page 1]

Wilson Steinmetz – 1849 - 1908

This biography was generated by a picture – the wrong picture. Jill Davidson sent me a picture of one of our preachers which she came across on Ancestry.com, Wilson Steinmetz. You can see the picture to the right. I am always glad to hear about or see one of our preachers I know little about. So, both Jill and I set about to gather information. Then, I realized I had a picture of Wilson Steinmetz which you see below from the 1906 Annual Conference. Your eyes probably see the same thing that Jill and I saw – these can't be two pictures of the same man. At this point, we are not sure who is portrayed in the first picture but I hope to pursue the contacts to find out who the man is.



But, having begun to find out a bit about this man, I thought we might take the time to piece together some of his story.

Wilson was born January 24, 1849, near Northampton, Pennsylvania, the son of Aaron and Lucy Ann. His father died when he was about 5 years old. He may have grown up in the household of an uncle. He married Mary Gruber probably about 1870 and took up residence near Bethlehem.



They were parents to four daughters, two of whom eventually became Gospel Workers. He must have enjoyed some success as a farmer since he employed three men as helpers. But tragedy struck in the form of an accident which necessitated the amputation of his leg. His farming career was ended. He decided that since he could

Wilson Steinmetz - 1906

not farm he would work for God. In 1893, at age 44, he was received as a probationer and assigned to the Northampton Church.

Throughout his ministry, he served in several churches: Northampton, Coopersburg, Allentown, South Allentown, and finally at Fleetwood / Blandon. Like his brothers in ministry, he served on some of the routine committees which were part of the Annual Conference. In 1895, he had been appointed to serve the Quakertown Church but the church declared its independence and refused to accept him retaining instead M. L. Zyner which led to a subsequent court battle.

He was a presenter at the Ministerial Convention in 1900. His title was ""The Believer's Attitude Towards Laying Up Earthly Treasures." The following notes were preserved:

By laying up we mean accumulating for future use. The Word says, "Lay not up for yourselves earthly treasures upon the earth." I Tim. 9:10 we read that they that would be rich fall into temptations, snares, etc. If desires for riches bring forth such fruit, what will the obtaining and holding fast of them result in. The rich man's money has not been the means of evangelizing the world. God is not hard up for money- He owns all things. We are God's stewards, and privileged characters to work with our hands, for the purpose of giving to others.

At the Ministerial Convention in 1904, he presented an essay entitled "Call to The Ministry." The message was summarized as follows:

The Minister's call is of God, it is a supernatural call, and a powerful call to one who will not shrink when persecuted or tortured. A call that is distinctive and definite. Paul could say, "Woe is Unto Me If I Preach Not the Gospel." It requires Heaven born men--such are often not understood by the world.

In August, 1902, his wife Mary died after a three month illness while he served as pastor at South Allentown. He married Emma Fritz following her death. They bore two more children.

By 1907, he began to experience failing health. The minutes of that year's conference record,

Committee on Examination of Travelling Elders- We have examined the Traveling Elders through their respective delegates and found them all satisfactory with the exception of W. Steinmetz. On account of nervous affection we deem it advisable to recommend the Conference to relieve him of the duties of taking charge of a work for the present.

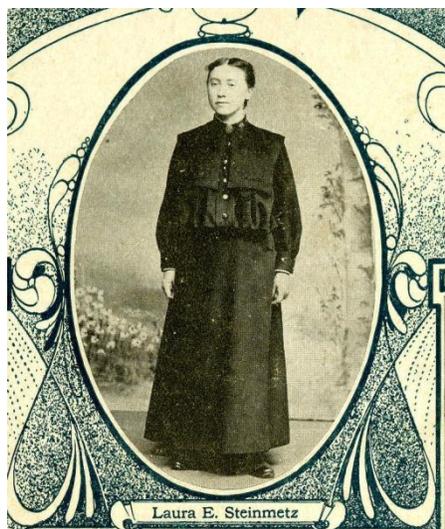
Later at the same conference, he asked to be unassigned. "Resolved, That upon the request of Bro. W. Steinmetz, we recommend the Conference to relieve him from taking charge of a work for the present."

By the following conference, death had claimed him. The conference minutes records his obituary:

WHEREAS, It has pleased our Heavenly Father, who doeth all things well to permit to be taken from our midst during the past year by the hand of death, Elder Wilson Steinmetz, of Fleetwood, Pa., be it

Resolved, That we confess that we have lost in him a conscientious Christian and willing laborer, and commend the widow and the family to the God of all Grace and comfort, who knoweth the hearts of all men and giveth rewards according to the deeds done in the body.

Brother Wilson Steinmetz was born January 24, 1849. In 1893 he was licensed to preach the Gospel which he did up to the last Annual Conference, since which, on account of physical disability, he had no charge until his death, July 28, 1908, aged 59 years, 6 months, and 4 days. For a number of years two of his daughters have been active workers in the Gospel Worker Society, one of whom fell asleep in Jesus several years ago.



The Bethlehem Globe Times reported on July 30, 1908, that he died of apoplexy after a three month illness.

The Allentown Leader presented an obituary for him on July 29, 1908 which ended as follows:

In his death the Mennonite denomination lost one of its ablest pastors and workers. Death was due to general debility. Rev. Steinmetz had been ailing since last year, when he was obliged to retire from the ministry, owing to feebleness and ill health. From that time on his condition became weaker. He suffered little pain and his death came as a peaceful sleep.

I hope you enjoyed that romp through BFC history. As always, I welcome your comments and questions.

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