

NOTES from Rev. Asa Bearss, senior Pastor of the Black Creek Church, gives additional light on the history and work of the Tunkers:

1. The exact date of the first organization of the denomination in Pennsylvania is a little uncertain, probably in 1736.
2. John Winger, for many years the only minister of the body in Canada, came to country near the close of the 18th Century. In the War 1812 he registered his people as "Tunkers" and secured exemption from military duty. He died in 1827.
3. The Tunkers have divided their work in Canada into four districts: Niagara, Waterloo, Markham and Nottawa. The Niagara District have six churches. Black Creek Church, the mother church in Canada, has 150 members.
4. They issue a semi-monthly paper called "Evangelical Visitor". It is published in Harrisburg, Pa. The editor, George Detwiler is a Canadian.
5. The Tunkers sustain two foreign missions, one in Africa and the other in India.

(Written in 1904)

* The Tunker Church, Black Creek, pictured on page 65.

THE TUNKERS - ORIGIN IN GERMANY

The Christian people called Tunkers are German Baptists. English speaking people often call them Dunkers and sometimes Dunkards. Their beginning dates back to 1708. One Alex. Mack and a few of his neighbors met together for the study of the Word of God. This little company of believers, in the course of a few years, formulated the creed which forms the basis of the Tunker Church. Numbers grew, societies multiplied, but they were scattered by persecution. To escape this persecution they decided to emigrate to America. The first company came over in 1719, and settled at Germantown, Pa, the spot where the first Mennonites also located. "By 1729 they had all reached the United States; and the society no longer exists in Europe." They may now be considered a purely American Church.

IN AMERICA

Soon after settling at Germantown they built their first church in America "and chose Peter Becker, a weaver, to be their minister. Art. Tunkers, Schaff-Herzog. Their churches spread throughout southeastern Pennsylvania, Virginia and Maryland. Later on by following their people in the movement westward, they became strong in Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and still further west, and now their ecclesiastical standard is planted on the Pacific Coast.

At first and for many years they used the German language in worship, but now the English prevails. They prefer rural life and avoid the trades and professions.

The Tunkers are evangelical in doctrine, and insist on a high standard of living. They are industrious and frugal, honest and simple in life and manners.

Their church government is Congregational. They have a regular ministry, but unsalaried, and chosen from business life without

without preparatory study. They practice the apostolic kiss of charity, hold to feet washing as an ordinance, and always have a "Love Feast" in connection with the Lord's Supper.

The membership of the Denomination probably aggregates one hundred thousand (1904). Their growth has come mostly from natural increase and not from aggressive work. Of late years the Tunkers have built several colleges in the face of strong protest against such institutions. This has made a division in the body. The conservatives are called the "old order Brethren" and the radicals "Progressives". The parties have their church papers, both German and English, which are made channels for advocating both the old and new views. There is no fellowship between the two schools, although they are essentially the same, both in doctrine and government. (It is to be hoped, when the heat of debate and contention is over, the two parties will again join their forces to do battle with the powers of evil at work in our world).

We have taken this survey of the body of Christians usually called "old Tunkers" by Pennsylvania people to introduce us to another body also often called Tunkers, but who are of later birth. They have no historical connection with the old body, or the German Seventh Day Baptists of Ephrata, Pa, but are called Tunkers, because many of their notions of church life and rule were copied from the original Tunkers. They hold to triune immersion and observe the "Love Feast", as the old church does, and yet they are not an off-shoot from it. They are of Mennonite origin, or rather one may say they are the offspring of a great religious movement that swept through southern Pennsylvania during the latter half of the 18th century.

We give a statement from the Life of "P.W. Otterbein" p.139: "Lancaster County is famous for the origin of new religious movements. The Evangelical Association the River Brethren and other religious bodies here had their origin. Pennsylvania in early times, was in a state of moral ferment, and the county swarmed with a diversity of sects". Martin Boehm, a new light Mennonite preacher, and later one of the founders of the United Brethren, had a society at a place called Donegal on the Susquehanna River. This society from its location in the course of time became known as the "River Brethren". They seem to have no tradition of the fact here given, and they sometimes give themselves as Dunker rather than as Mennonite origin. The reason is doubtless their resemblance, in some things, to the Dunkers." P. 141. (The above fact as to the origin of the River Brethren is substantially the same as that given to me by Ex-Bishop Jacob Erb. The Bishop was a native of Lancaster County, and well acquainted with the history of the religious movements of that district).

The Donegal Society on the Susquehanna River held the views of the original Tunkers in many respects, and on this account were soon called Tunkers; but like their prototype they speak of themselves as "The Brethren" and by way of distinction from the older body they often say "River Brethren". (The public, at least in Canada, knows them as Tunkers. To this there is seldom any objection either by ministers or laymen. So universal is the application of the name that very few outside of the society know they have any other name. We have thought it might be appropriate to call them New School Tunkers.

TUNKERS IN UPPER CANADA: The Tunkers came to Upper Canada with the Pennsylvania immigration at an early day, and planted their church standards in the pioneer settlements. Small clusters of their people were gathered in all the larger Pennsylvania communities of the new Province.

FIRST CHURCH IN CANADA (UPPER)

These first societies were very small, and the first organized church was on Black Creek, in the Niagara District. The first preacher was John Winger, known throughout the Pennsylvania settlements as "Hansley" Winger. Probably he was a small man, and as the Germans are fond of diminutives they called him "Hansley", little John. This company over whom he watched as spiritual shepherd was the mother Tunker Church of Canada. (It is not numbers, however, that make a church, but a compact of Christian believers though few in number. St Augustine said "ubi tres laici, ibi ecclesia" where there are three people there is the church. The Latin proverb say "ubi Christus, ibi ecclesia" where Christ is, there is the church." "The Church of God is a community of righteous ones", remarks Delitzsch.)

Early in the last century the Tunkers of the "River Brethren" wing planted a small vine in the wilderness of Canada on Black Creek, within 10 miles of Niagara Falls. The vine has become strong and healthy. The little church at first was mostly made up of Wingers, Climenhages, Ciders, Barnhardts, etc.

It is a striking fact that the members of this first Tunker Church were almost wholly composed of families who were settled along Black Creek. This Creek is the second largest stream that empties into the Niagara River above the Falls, and its mouth is about midway between the Falls and Fort Erie. It has its source in the great marsh through which the Welland Canal was cut. It flows through a clay district; but so level is the country that there is scarcely any current to be seen. The drainage from the clay soil colors the water, and this no doubt gave it the name of Black Creek. The dwellers in this district are quiet, industrious and frugal. They have built beautiful homes, and gathered about them all the comforts and conveniences that one could wish. (In this section the Tunkers now have the controlling influence, and are doing much to mould the sentiment of the community. At the same time, the advance of thought is also having its influence on them, and they are falling into line with the progressive religious movements of the day.)

There was also a small society of Tunkers in the "Short Hills," Township of Pelham within six or eight miles of the city of St. Catharines. The preacher of this little group for years was Andrew Hensler, a man of great generosity and nobility of character. (What a contrast: The first society planted on Black Creek Flats, the next one one of the highest points of the Niagara Peninsula, and yet not more than 25 miles apart.) These two societies were for many years the only societies of this order in the whole Niagara District, and only a few scattered families were counted in their number. Today (1904) though they have only three or four churches, these churches aggregate a large membership, a proof of the present wide influence of the body in this district.

Tunker Church Black Creek pictured.

For many years, more than half a century, this plain people kept up their societies and regular worship without a house of worship. This was probably one of the reasons why they made such slow progress in Canada for a long period. They very seldom used school houses, or halls, or the houses of other religious bodies. There seems to have been a prejudice against set or stated places of worship. Still they had meetings regularly, but at the homes of members or in the houses of those who were in sympathy with their views. This plan had the

advantage of distributing the meetings over a large district of the country, and brought religious services to the homes of the people. Such a plan, however, left them without a church home, and without the influence of a church centre, and the young without a Sunday School. The result was their young people mostly drifted elsewhere and left them without fresh blood.

EARLY DRESS: The early Tunkers were distinguished for plainness in dress, indeed they put special emphasis on this. The Mennonites did the same and so did the early Methodists. The Quakers, who came out in the great Puritan upheaval in England, had the same strict notions of costume but their men and women had a taste for fine cloth coats and plain silk dresses. All these sects expected their people to adopt a particular and uniform style of dress, but the early Tunkers outdid all the others in plainness. The style of dress was in a sense a badge of membership, and considered a proof of loyalty to Christ.

An old-time Tunker kept his hair long and parted in the middle; he had a full beard and never allowed the razor to touch any part of his face. He wore a "Cut-away" coat with an upright collar, of home-made cloth. His overcoat was made of the same goods as the under coat; it also had a straight collar, but had a large cape attached to it. This gave warmth and protection to the shoulders. His hat was low, crowned with a broad brim made of heavy felt. The above describes the winter outfit.

The women were equally plain. They wore white muslin caps without a border, a shaker bound in black, and a dress of simplest make indeed. These people were ideals of plainness. (I do not know that there was a law demanding a particular style of dress, but it was a strong sentiment that no one taking his place among them thought of ignoring. To meet with a congregation of such people was an impressive sight. It seemed as if you were taken back to earlier centuries of the Christian Church, and sat among the old believers in their simple exercises of devout worship.)

DOCTRINE: In doctrine, the Tunkers do not differ essentially from other evangelical bodies. They hold to the great verities of the Christian faith, and insist on Christ-likeness in living. Their polity is Congregational- the congregation rules, not the synod or conferences. The ministers are chosen by nomination and vote of the members of the Church. They take men from the plow, or shop, or other callings, and put them over the flock. They are opposed to salaried ministry. Their aim is to keep away from the professional idea of the ministry and confirm to what they regard as the apostolic practice. They had no formulated creed, but claim to be governed by apostolic authority. They hold to the kiss of charity as enjoined by Paul. When they meet the men salute each other with a kiss, and so do the women, and at parting they do the same. This is a token of fellowship, for when a member is under discipline the kiss is withheld.

COMMUNION SEASON AND LOVE FEASTS: The Tunkers have a semi-annual communion season. The spring meeting is usually held in May or June, and the Fall meeting in September or early October. These communion seasons were called "Love Feasts" (German Liebens Mahl). To a large extent they were social functions. Lambs were provided for this religious festival, and there was always a plentiful supply of boiled lamb, lamb soup, potatoes, bread, butter and sauce. Outsiders were welcome to this feast, and a free supper was given to all. This made the communion a social event, and great crowds came together at such times. Tunker Love Feasts before the days of churches, were invariably held in barns, on the premises of one of the members. The members

expected a big meeting, prepared for it, and were never disappointed. (I have distinctly in memory one of these great meetings. It was held on the banks of the Grand River, in the Township of Waterloo, within $3\frac{1}{2}$ miles of the town of Preston. As usual the gathering was large. The country people from all directions were present. First came the feast, in which the crowd as well as the members participated. The Lord's Supper followed, in which only the members shared. And last of all came "Feet Washing", also for members only. They had buckets prepared for this purpose, and kept for these occasions, one for the men and another for the women. The men would wash each other's feet in pairs, dry them with a towel and end the ceremony by giving the apostolic kiss. The women did the same, until all who were in fellowship with the church had taken part in the ceremony. An address by the presiding minister or bishop always preceded the Lord's Supper and Feet Washing. The last was regarded by them as an ordinance as well as Baptism and the Lord's Supper and so considered to be of perpetual obligation. Their peculiar views were always discussed on these occasions. In this way the public became acquainted with the distinguishing notions of the Tunkers on doctrine and practice.

The Liebens Mahl- Love Feast-was always at night. This and the manner of its observance, made the occasion a great attraction. The old time Methodist had a Love Feast, but it consisted in passing bread and water to communicants just before the Lord's Supper was administered. No other body of Christians, at least in modern days, makes a feast like the Tunkers. The custom is peculiar to this people.

The Tunkers were in harmony with the Mennonites and Quakers on the question of non-resistance. The old militia law exempted them from all military duties, but exacted what was called a fine. Of late years the fine has not been demanded. The following incident illustrates the spirit of this people. In Pa. there was a Tunker who had a neighbor that was his bitter enemy. During the Revolutionary War this neighbor got into trouble for some misdeed, was court-martialled and sentenced to be shot. The Tunker heard of it and walked many miles to intercede for the life of the poor man. Washington said: "Since this man is your friend I will spare his life" "I asked for his life", replied the Tunker "because he is my enemy".

The Tunkers refuse to hold all public offices beyond that of school trustee and pathmaster. They take no part in political agitation, and exercise the franchise very cautiously. They claim that their aim is to get back to the apostolic ideal of church forms and life, and they assume that they have this in triune immersion, the Liebens Mahl, non resistance, refusal of an oath at law and general non conformity to popular notions of Christian living.

Within the last forty years the Tunkers in Canada have taken to Church building. They now have a large number of large substantial houses of worship. One of these is on Black Creek, two miles west of the village of Stevensville. The house is plain, but comfortable has a basement with cooking stove and every convenience for holding their semi annual Liebens Mahl. The barns are no longer needed for their big meetings.

The time was when they seemed to ignore the press, and all the literature they used even the Hymn Books, came from other churches. They had no distinctive literature of their own. All this is now changed. They are becoming quite aggressive, are entering on the foreign missionary work and are seeking to help the world evangelization.

* The above paper, however, is intended to characterize the Tunkers as I knew them more than sixty years ago. As such they helped to make the early history of Pennsylvania settlements in Upper Canada.

Pictures of Rev. Asa Bearss and wife. Rev. Asa Bearss was Senior Pastor, Black Creek Church. Also a picture of Son of Rev. Asa Bearss and wife.

This was written by A.B. Scherck in 1904.

Audrey Miller Laurie

Audrey Miller Laurie (Mrs. R.M.)
Dec. 27, 1968.
Research Counsellor,
Ontario Genealogical Society.

*The Tunkers are now known as
Brethren in Christ Church*