

A Brief History of Menno Haven

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I. Formative Years: 1940's - 1958

Although members of the Illinois Mennonite Conference churches did not form a camping association until 1957, organized interest in church camping was in evidence already in 1943. From the very beginning this interest had its roots in a concern for the spiritual development of youth.

An Illinois Mennonite Church Camp Committee, appointed by the Illinois Mennonite Conference did significant work in 1943 and 44 nurturing seeds of interest in organized church camping among congregations in Illinois. This committee summarized their research and convictions in a nine point report presented at a meeting of the Illinois Conference body in August of 1944. Four of the nine points presented dealt with the vision to purchase and develop a property for the purpose of camping ministry.

During the summers of 1944, 45 and 1946 successful summer camps were held at two locations, first at a farm near Tremont and then at a Free-Methodist Camp near Peoria. After the 1945 summer camp the Conference leadership took action to include the supervision of the summer camps in the responsibilities of the educational branch of the Conference, known at that time as the Christian Education Cabinet. Also in 1945 the Executive Committee of the Illinois Mennonite Conference appointed a "Camp Grounds Committee." This committee was instructed to find a number of sites that might be suitable for the camp program

of the Illinois Conference. This committee prepared a questionnaire, which they sent to pastors to distribute among congregation members to assess the level of interest in obtaining a campground for the Illinois Mennonite Churches. Of the questionnaires returned, 64% indicated definite interest in purchasing a site. This committee investigated at least three possible sites for purchase, however no steps toward purchasing a site took place at this time.

One or two weeks of summer camp continued to be offered with some irregularity during the late 1940's and early 1950's. Camp Ground investigating committees continued to evolve. Many potential sites were investigated, but no steps were taken to actually purchase a location. It is quite apparent that the lack of a camp ground location that could be depended upon each summer, hindered the development and momentum of the summer camping program at this time.

In 1952 the pastors of several Northern Illinois Mennonite Churches took the initiative, providing a one week camping experience for their youth grades four through eight. The camp was opened to children in other congregations. The camp was held at Camp Emmaus, belonging to the Brethren Church, and located near Oregon, Illinois. One hundred and thirteen children attended this camp. In 1953 the Christian Education Cabinet again became actively involved as sponsors of the summer camp program. Robert Keller served as camp director as he had in 1952. Youth from nearly every Mennonite Church congregation in the state attended one of

the two weeks of camp held at Camp Emmaus.

Momentum and vision were growing among Illinois Mennonites involved with the youth camping program. During 1953 the Christian Education Cabinet sent several persons to “The Second Study Conference and Workshop on Church Camps” held at the Prairie Street Mennonite Church in Elkhart, Indiana. Mennonites involved with the growing Church Camp movement from various places in the U.S. and Canada, reflected, discussed and prayed together. The meeting energized and provided valuable insights for persons involved in developing the church camping program in Illinois. Two weeks of summer camp continued each summer during the mid 1950’s, utilizing the rented Camp Emmaus facility.

A subcommittee of the Christian Education Cabinet known as the Illinois Camp Study Committee became active at this time and produced an excellent article, “What is Church Camping?” in the June 1956 Missionary Guide. A vision for church camping was articulated and clarified.

“...Is it a vacation - a sports contest - a vast playground?

Is it child evangelism - or another summer Bible School?

Church camping is something found nowhere else.

-It is a time of Christian fellowship in a natural setting close to God’s handiwork.

-It is a mixture of growth in Christian grace and knowledge, broadening Christian acquaintances, and physical relaxation through new activities.

-The objective is a Christian who has increased in wisdom,

stature, and favor with God and man.,

-Must a camp make Christians out of ten-year-olds? -no. But it should help lay the groundwork of broadened experience which will some day bear fruit in a well rounded Christian. ...”

This article and the work of this particular committee stand out as a pivotal point from which the search for a camp site for the Illinois Mennonite Churches, rapidly gained momentum.

An open state wide meeting was held June 7, 1956 at the Metamora Church for further discussion and decision by the Illinois Mennonite Conference concerning the direction of church camping. Another meeting followed on the evening of April 25, 1957 at the Roanoke Church to discuss the progress report of the Camp Study Committee. After a period of discussion relative to prospective camp sites and organizational procedures it was decided to organize an Illinois Mennonite Camp Association. Four temporary officers were elected and authorized to form a non-profit corporation upon the basis of a proposed constitution. These temporary officers met on May 14 at Peoria and signed an application for a charter. Also, they invited members of the congregations to join the Association with \$100 memberships. On June 7, 1957 another public meeting was called to adopt a constitution and elect a board of directors. Officers of the Illinois Mennonite Camp Association Board of Directors elected at this time were Joe Massanari, president; Lawrence Horst, vice president; Howard Mellinger, secretary and Elton Ulrich, treasurer.

Summer camps for boys and girls continued during these formative years: in 1957 a one week event at the East Bay Camp near Bloomington and two weeks of camp back at

Camp Emmaus in 1958. Later in the fall of 1958 the Illinois Mennonite Camp Association made an important decision and commitment. After investigating approximately fifty potential sites during the years of 1957 and 1958, they at last found what they were looking for. In November of 1958 the Camp Association purchased 80 acres of rough land near Tiskilwa in Bureau County. Now the Illinois churches had a place that would be available all year round for developing its camping program. It is this place that became known as Camp Menno Haven.

II. Development Years: Program and Facilities 1958 - 1980

Work started almost immediately following the purchase of the land. Approximately 100 persons were present for the first workday on Saturday, November 22, 1958. On this first workday much sand and gravel were moved with heavy equipment and many trees were removed from the area that would become the lake. The annual tradition of Rally day was started in April of 1959. Jess Kauffman, a key pioneer in the development of the Mennonite camping ministry in North America was a guest speaker and presented two messages:

Membership Certificate No. <u>66</u>	INCORPORATED UNDER THE LAWS OF THE STATE OF ILLINOIS	Number of Memberships <u>1</u>
Illinois Mennonite Camp Association, Inc.		
This certifies that <u>Willard F. Zoss</u> is a member of the		
Illinois Mennonite Camp Association, Inc.		
a Corporation not for profit, subject to the Constitution and By-Laws of the Corporation.		
In Witness Whereof, this certificate has been signed and sealed this <u>4</u> day of <u>March</u> ,		
19 <u>59</u> Paid. \$100.00	(SEAL)	
<u>H. Meisinger</u> SECRETARY		<u>Jess Kauffman</u> PRESIDENT

“What a Church Camp Can Accomplish” and “How a Church Camp Achieves Its Goals.” Following a noon meal cooked over an open fire, Edith Herr a professor from Goshen College, led a nature hike and worship based on Psalms 1. This Rally Day has followed annually on the Memorial Day holiday and is a time to invite God’s blessing upon each upcoming summer of camping. In addition to this first Rally Day in 1959, a special dedication of Menno Haven to God for Christian service took place at the camp on June 27 of that year.

The two summer camps of 1959 were held in different locations. The camp for younger children was held at the familiar Camp Emmaus setting, while the Junior High camp was held at Menno Haven. A group of High School youth, Bill Kaufmann and Orval Yordy contributed many hours of work to ready the camp grounds and a small kitchen and dining hall. Vernon Schertz, the camp director, summed up this first camp at Menno Haven with an emblem. The emblem depicts three important elements that are essential ingredients in all of Menno Haven’s camps: Recreation, Fellowship and Worship. Campers slept in tents, cooked many of their own meals, and were transported to the Kaufmann family pond for swimming.

New developments came quickly during the first years: a one hundred and fifty-two acre farm with a small house adjoining the original 80 acres was acquired, three metal buildings were erected, five rustic cedar cabins were constructed by members of the Willow Springs, East Bend, Roanoke, Morton and Metamora congregations. Work on the lake and dam were completed, providing a recreational lake for Menno Haven and flood control for the village of Tiskilwa. A sandy beach and swimming area were created at the northeast corner of the lake.

Typically four weeks of summer camps were offered during the

1960’s. Mennonite Youth Fellowship Work Camps combined the components of recreation, fellowship and worship with significant improvement projects. Spiritual leadership was provided for by pastors. Each “Camp Pastor” usually served for one week of camp. In order to facilitate the operation of Menno Haven, the first Camp Director, Vernon Schertz, and family move to the farm house. Ferne Bachman, the first waterfront director at Menno Haven, was instrumental in planning for safe swimming recreation and swimming lessons for campers. Her expertise in Red Cross waterfront safety and instruction continued in at least a consultant role well into the 1980’s.

The method for staffing the summer camps continued to evolve. It was recognized that to have people who could serve through the entire Menno Haven summer camp block would build continuity and quality into the program which was not possible when the entire staff turned over each week. This dynamic was true for all areas, whether it was putting food on the table three times a day, directing the crafts program, being a cabin counselor 24 hours a day, or providing oversight for the spiritual emphasis as program director. The value of spiritual nurture and leadership training for young adults serving on the summer staff was articulated by one summer program director in a report at an Illinois Conference meeting: “...camp is also a place where God calls counselors to a dedication and clarification of His will for their lives.”

By the mid 1960’s the Camp Association was ready to proceed with a facility development program and the Illinois Mennonite Conference gave formal affirmation. The first step in this plan was a two story kitchen and dining room facility with an auditorium and office. Recognizing the potential for expanded ministry, the Christian Education Cabinet, members of the Camp Board, the building committee and camp

representatives from some congregations met together to plan specific ways that the Illinois Mennonite Churches might utilize these year round facilities. A representative of this planning effort communicated in this way; "...we grappled with the formulation of a program embracing the possibility of promoting family camps, interest groups, workshops, seminars, retreats and spiritual fellowship group meetings." The facility became known as the Main Lodge and was completed sufficiently to be in partial use by the summer of 1967.

To provide efficient and effective leadership and management of facilities, the Camp Association decided to appoint a full time Camp Administrator. Alton Horst was appointed to this position and moved with his wife Dorothy, and family to the camp farm house in the summer of 1968. The 1968 report of the Camp Association provides a vision for the assignment Alton accepted at that time: "The Camp Administrator will among other things, recruit staff workers, train and motivate counselors, pursue a good public relations program, and oversee the year round activities which we insist must become a reality if the new facility is to become that which it is capable of becoming." The 1960's and 70's saw a general increase in the number of youth participating in the summer camp programs. The summer camp program combined traditions that campers looked forward to each summer, while at the same time offering variety, new challenges, and Christian nurture themes appropriate for each age level. In keeping with this philosophy a wilderness Canoe Trip Program was started in the early 1970's. Each summer, groups of many different ages traveled to northern Minnesota or southern Canada, embarking on journeys by canoe through some of God's most pristine wilderness areas. This innovative adventure program reached its peak of activity by the late 1970's and diminished during the 1980's.

Although the Main Lodge provided a winterized facility, overnight lodging accommodated only the young and the hardy during the winter months. Youth groups including the annual Mennonite Youth Fellowship Institute came; young men slept on the first floor and young women slept upstairs, everyone slept on the floor. By the mid 1970's the time had come to move forward with the next phase of facility development. A Mennonite Board of Missions Mobile Builders Unit came to Menno Haven in 1976, providing much of labor needed to construct the two Guest Lodges with motel units upstairs and bunk rooms downstairs. This construction phase continued into 1978 and included a bathhouse in the new camping area, the pool facility, and Pine Grove residence with an apartment on the lower level. These new facilities made Menno Haven much more attractive as a Retreat Center enabling greater use by Illinois Conference groups, family groups as well as many other church and community organizations. Additional persons joined the Menno Haven resident staff with an emphasis in program directing. New resident staff, serving for various periods of time, included Wayne and Annette Albrecht, Christine Kaufmann and Ann Schertz. They shared in many of the tasks of house keeping, maintenance and food service, along with Alton and Dorothy Horst.

III. Full calendar, debt liquidation, maintaining the vision: 1980 - 2000

An ever busier schedule characterizes this era. Menno Haven grew into its facilities. Menno Haven Staff and Board of Directors grew in an understanding that to be faithful stewards we needed to give attention to a variety of ministries. On one hand there were the Menno Haven Summer Camps, the key ministry which led to the purchase and development of Menno Haven. There were other

Menno Haven Program events, planned by Menno Haven staff and offered to our constituent churches: Senior Adult Retreats, Fall Bible Conferences, Parent - Child Retreats, Engaged Encounters and others. Program director in the mid 1980's, Dennis Zehr, in conversation with the Illinois Conference Nurture Commission, endeavored to plan at most one new program event each year. In more recent years program directors, Gwendolyn Myers, started and David "Doc" Johnson continue a Junior and Senior High Winter Retreat program.

Constituent churches utilized Menno Haven through other events planned by the Conference: leadership events, conference meetings, women's meetings, retreats and spiritual emphasis events. Many congregations came to fellowship and worship together in a different setting. The Illinois Mennonite Conference shared office space at Menno Haven for several years. Families from our supporting churches and the broader Mennonite Church across the continent have come to Menno Haven for reunions, weddings and more.

Retreat ministry among non-constituent church and community groups grew steadily during this period, often using the calendar, facilities and staff energies to capacity and perhaps beyond. This retreat ministry is important because it provides a valuable service to these groups and because it provides significant income, in short, it represents good stewardship. Camp Menno Haven's name was officially changed to Menno Haven Camp and Retreat Center during this era to better represent the broadened reality of its ministry.

During the early 1980's it became clear to the Board of Directors that the large debt incurred during the facility expansion of the 1970's needed to be liquidated. Interest

rates were at above 14% and the Illinois Conference was providing significant subsidy support. A capital fund campaign was undertaken and its success led to complete retirement of the debt by 1985.

Staffing needs grew as usage grew. The need for a full time Food Service Director became a reality, the Program Director position continued, a variety of full and part time staff, as well as volunteers served. Alton Horst provided steady leadership as Camp Administrator for 21 years and retired on October 1, 1989. Dorothy Horst in reality served with Alton, often filling in the gaps and providing leadership in many areas.

Rod and Betty Detweiler came to Menno Haven in 1988. Rod became Menno Haven's Executive Director after Alton Horst's retirement. Betty served for several years as Food Service Director. In addition to providing oversight for all of the ongoing activities, two major developments took place during Rod's tenure. First of all a state of the art Adventure Education Course was built. Interwoven in all components of Adventure Education at Menno Haven are opportunities for applying spiritual principles for everyday living. The individual is challenged and groups are challenged to work together in creative ways. This program strengthens Menno Haven's programs and attracts many rental and school groups. Also during the 1990's renovation of the lake was undertaken. Over the years the lake had become quite shallow because of siltation. A dry dam was installed to reduce the silting and much of the lake was deepened.

The millennium came to a close at Menno Haven with Dave Horst, son of Alton and Dorothy, returning to Menno Haven. Dave, with his wife Andrea, responded to a sense of God calling their family to return to Menno Haven. Dave began

serving as Executive Director in April of 1999.

IV. Harbingers of the Future [and Beyond] 2000 - 2010

Upgrades to several facilities were undertaken as the decade began. Village cabins had shutters repaired and eaves troughs installed. The pool had major plumbing repair completed but continued to offer challenges as the decade progressed. The computer and phone systems were expanded and improved. A cedar storage shed was built near the boat dock to house life jackets, paddles and outpost camping supplies. The farm house benefited from a generous estate gift, receiving new windows, siding, better insulation and a new roof.

Discussions that had begun in the mid 1990's between the Board and the Executive Director concerning the need for an Activity Center continued. The Elton and Miriam Ulrich family, upon Miriam's passing, generously established a memorial fund in her honor to help build an Activity Center. Due to various circumstances, including several staff and Board changes over a short period of time, and shifting expectations surrounding the size and cost of the proposed building the project was not completed. As the new decade got under way the Board again focused on an Activity Center as a pressing need but placed it in a larger context. The larger context was the need for additional staff housing, facilities that were showing their age and needed upgrades, and the sense that endowment funds for the long range support of Menno Haven would be very helpful.

As plans for an Activity Center developed, current facilities that could use upgrades were identified and ideas for additional staff housing emerged, the realization that a significant capital campaign was needed also grew. To

generate the funds for these various projects, what was known as Faith In Action: the Campaign for Menno Haven took shape. This was to be the first million dollar campaign for Menno Haven. Just a few months prior to the planned launch of this campaign, the 9-11 terrorism event happened in the United States. Should the campaign proceed or not? After much prayer and discernment, the campaign was launched as originally planned. Although the original goal was \$1.3 million, the campaign was concluded when the \$1 million mark was reached.

The Activity Center was completed and opened for use in January 2004, and was dedicated at Rally Day, May 31, 2004. As the result of a naming contest, it is called Eagle Wing Activity Center. Alton Horst submitted that name and referenced Isaiah 40:31 as his inspiration. Used extensively by many groups throughout the year, this facility offers a place for recreation including a climbing wall, a place for weddings or receptions, conferences, plays or concerts, and an alternative to the outdoors in the summer when it rains. The staff agrees that it is hard to even think about Menno Haven without Eagle Wing; it is a huge blessing to the ministry!

As a result of the Faith in Action Campaign, the Deer Run Staff House was completed and occupied in December 2004. A variety of other improvement projects were also completed as well. Funds were available to cover operating costs but no endowments were established. At the end of the campaign, for a variety of reasons, there was again some residual debt as there had been in the 1980s.

David "Doc" Johnson became the Executive Director in November 2004. The Main Lodge was renamed Lakeview Lodge during this time. The heating system that was installed when this facility was built in 1968 was deteriorating and

needed significant attention. The Board considered long and hard whether to 'patch' the old system, replace the old system with something similar or take the long view, bite the bullet, and modernize the system. With the aid of a grant from the Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation, the decision was to retrofit the building with duct work and install a modern geothermal heating and cooling system. Fifteen wells, 150 feet into the ground, provide for both the heating and, for the first time, an effective cooling system for the building. This \$75,000 project also required seeking funds to complete the task. Between volunteers who completed some tasks and generous donors, the project was completed.

The year 2008 approached. That would be the 50th year of operation for Menno Haven. An organization has only one 50th birthday so it seemed to the Board that a celebration of some sort was called for. They established a 50th Year Celebration Committee to plan the celebration. The committee chose a theme, "Seeds of Faith: Seasons of Flowering", scheduled a series of four events throughout the year, and, with the Board, launched a 50th Year Celebration Campaign. The goals for the campaign were to raise funds for a) upkeep and upgrades of current facilities, b) eliminate the \$120,000 debt, and c) provide funds for an extended Rally Day event including numerous work day projects.

As part of the 50th year celebration, campers, counselors, board members, parents and others were encouraged to write stories related to their experience at Menno Haven, which would be published in some form. At the Association Meeting in November 2007, 2008 was declared a year of celebration. 2008 arrived. The first official event was the Illinois Mennonite Conference session, which was held at Menno Haven. The second event was an Extended Rally Day event with a workday on Saturday with more than 100

participants, a worship and story telling day on Sunday, and a traditional Rally Day on Monday with the added feature of the dedication of Founders Grove. The third event was the Reunion Family Camp in July and the fourth was the recognition of former Board Members at the Illinois Mennonite Camp Association meeting in November. In all about 50 stories were collected but the publication of these stories was delayed.

The goal of eliminating the debt was accomplished and, as the decade neared its end, two bequests permitted the establishment of an endowment fund. The Board continued to focus on discerning a sense of God's direction for Menno Haven. What upgrades should be undertaken next? How can we be responsive to the Illinois Mennonite Conference, serve the needs of the various diverse groups in the Conference, and strengthen the longstanding historical link between us? What are our strengths and how do we effectively use these strengths and facilities for ministry? How do we encourage younger persons to get involved in the Association and in the ministry here at Menno Haven?

Many youth have made first time commitments to enter into the Christian Life at Menno Haven. Many persons have been nudged by the Holy Spirit to continue in the journey of following Jesus at Menno Haven. Images of God as the loving creator longing for peace in a violent world have been enlarged for youth and adults at Menno Haven. Menno Haven needs to continue to be intentional about these spiritual tasks as we come together for recreation, fellowship and worship around the campfire and the scriptures. Who knows what God has in store for Menno Haven in the next decades?