
FAITH Of My Forefathers

by Lorraine Frantz Edwards*

"Lord lift me up and let me stand,
By faith on heaven's tableland.
A higher plain than I have found.
Lord, plant my feet on higher ground."

If "north" is "higher" (opposed to south being lower), then indeed my feet were planted "on higher ground."

I had driven 300 miles north to Modesto, California, from Lancaster, to attend the Old German Baptist Brethren Conference (OGBB) held annually on the weekend of Pentecost (fifty days after Easter).

Although I have "roots" in the Old German Baptist Brethren, I knew nothing of their conference—or their ways—until very recently. I received, indubitably, the warmest welcome of any denomination I've ever visited.

I was a "name dropper" (my Frantz maiden name is legend in this brotherhood), but I'm confident that everyone receives heartfelt greetings.

That farm community (Modesto) is, indeed, a "tableland." Homes across the nation are fed from crops grown in the San Joaquin Valley.

During those several days I was standing—and sitting—and walking—and talking—with people of "faith." My personal beliefs and convictions seem shallow when viewed beside theirs.

They wear their faith for all the world to see: beards, black flat-brim hats, frock coats for men; simple dresses with self-material shawl and self-material apron for the women. Long hair was pulled back into a bun and covered with a white-net bonnet.

Correction: they aren't wearing these "for all the world to see;" they wear them as a daily reminder, to themselves, that they are set aside. They are living Christianity as it was in another era.

*Lorraine Frantz Edwards, P. O. Box 2076, Lancaster, CA 93539-2076, is the author of a number of previous articles printed in *MFH*. She is happy to correspond with anyone interested in the Showalter or Frantz family.

My camping trailer was parked on the conference grounds; I was prepared for total involvement. I sat in the council tent on a wooden backless bench, and listened to the elders preach—much like my grandparents did 100 years ago.

I got "goose pimples" as I listened to the congregation sing (a capella) hymns that were familiar to my grandparents and great-grandparents.

I ate meals in the dining tent; the menu hasn't changed for generations. I wept at the table when they passed the apple butter. I hadn't thought of apple butter in twenty-five years—not since my dad died.

The memories rushed back as I recalled how Dad *always* mixed apple butter with his cottage cheese. I shared my recollections with two "sisters" across the table. "Oh, that's the way we always eat our cottage cheese." (A tradition I knew nothing about.)

"Tradition"—a sense of family—has been absent in my life. I became involved in genealogy to learn more about my "family"—my ancestors. Had I been better prepared at the OGBB Conference, I might have made contact with second, third, or fourth cousins.

Perhaps another time, in an informal setting, we'll meet again and discuss relationships and folklore. This trip was a pilgrimage regarding the faith of my forefathers.

The Love Feast and Communion are indelibly imprinted in my memory. Not being a member, I could not participate, but, as an observer, I sang when they sang and prayed when they prayed.

I pondered and was amazed as their solemn service progressed. First the ministers brought messages during a period of "self examination." The ritual of foot washing followed.

In the first century, before the Lord Jesus served the broken bread and the cup, He and the disciples ate the Last Supper.

On this Pentecost Sunday evening, Old German Baptist Brethren elders moved among the members and set the table with bowls, cups, forks, and spoons.

Slowly the food was served: boiled beef, crumbled bread in rich beef broth, sliced bread, and drinking water. Members ate slowly; the children did not eat. There was no whispering among the members; their children sat quietly and patiently, too.

To my embarrassment some visitors near me were talking and laughing—

oblivious of frowns and stares. I perceived that they were not receiving the silent message so I politely asked them to be quiet!

Throughout the long evening, the only time the participants shifted positions was to kneel in prayer beside the plank seats. Ministers preached, hymns were sung, and finally Communion was served.

Again the elders moved slowly among the tables and "broke bread" for each brother and sister. When told to eat, the communicants very slowly ate the bread, obviously mindful that it represented the broken body of our Lord Jesus Christ.

With the same solemnity the cup was passed, representing the shed blood of our Lord and Savior.

When the Love Feast commenced at 5:00 p.m. in the dining tent, the day was warm, sunny, and pleasant.

By 8:00 p.m., it was dark and cold with a strong wind whipping around the tent. My feet and legs were chilled.

By 9:00 p.m., I felt like an icicle and left the assembly for my cozy camp trailer, ashamed that I did not have the fortitude to stay for the remainder of the service. Even in the comfort of my sleeping bag, with a blanket over me, my feet and legs were still numb with cold at 10:30 p.m. when I heard the people leaving the tent where the service had been held.

After several days with Old German Baptist Brethren, I should not have been surprised by their faith and stamina. In the comfort of my home-away-from-home, I reflected on my "worldly" life.

There weren't many recreation vehicles among the 5,000-plus members; few, if any, televisions and radios (I own two TV's and several radios.); modest cars; clean homes—my pursuit of genealogy and possession of a computer doesn't lend itself to an immaculate home—or a closer walk with the Lord.

They (genealogy and computer) are very time-consuming and I'm often guilty of "worshipping" at my computer on a Sunday morning or watching TV church.

The OGBB Annual Conference and the Love Feast allowed me to experience a meaningful part of my grandparents' and ancestors' lives.

How blessed I am, through genealogy, to find my roots and be able to (figuratively) walk where they walked. To God be the glory! He planted my feet on "higher ground."