

MANY HANDS MAKE LIGHT WORK
by Lorraine Frantz Edwards
A sequel to "Third Times a Charm"

Never was the old saying, "Many hands make light work" more meaningful than at Old German Baptist Brethren Annual Meeting.

Months of planning and preparation led to exact execution of numerous tasks. The crews were assembled earlier and the first tent went up right on schedule -- 7 a.m. Quickly thereafter, men and boys began to drive pre-cut stakes into the ground in preparation for planks and tabletops. In less than two hours that portion of the alfalfa field was converted into a huge dining room. Dozens of women stood at the newly constructed tables and peeled 800 pounds of potatoes for the noonday meal.

The two previous days had been overcast, cold and gloomy. That Thursday morning God provided a beautiful sunrise and an absolutely gorgeous day. One couldn't ask for more ideal weather for the six day conference.

Skillfully, the council tent went up and workmen, with sledgehammers, were soon driving stakes for the backless benches. Electricians were busy, in both tents, stringing electric lights. Plumbers were installing sinks in the dining tent. It was awesome to watch the teamwork. Many hands were making light work. Not a detail was overlooked: Men and boys sanded the plank seats to remove splinters and rough edges. Other details were cared for that I was oblivious to or have forgotten to mention.

The noon meal was served with the precision of a drill team. Food handlers brought the food to the center tables that ran the length of the tent. The

menu is traditional -- probably the very same items that my grandparents enjoyed on tent-raising day a century ago. Boiled beef with potatoes and broth, white or brown bread, real butter, applebutter, sweet pickles, sliced peaches, coffee or tea.

Before the meal, prior to the prayer, the "brothers and sisters" broke into a hymn of praise. To paraphrase a little: Many voices, a cappella, make gorgeous song!

Eight-hundred-thirty-two people could be seated at a meal. People weren't rushed out but at an appointed time those assembled broke into another song of praise -- and a closing prayer -- and all filed out to make room for those who had not yet been served. Approximately fourteen-hundred people enjoyed that simple, but absolutely delicious, meal.

This ritual was repeated for eight ensuing meals, sans potatoes. (Potatoes were provided because of the strenuous work.) Subsequent meals had crumbled bread in the rich beef broth.

"Many hands" tackled the cleanup process when the diners exited. Meat, sliced peaches, pickles and applebutter went back into large containers. Each table had a big dishpan of hot soapy water. Some people washed -- some people dried. Soon all the bowls, cups and silverware for thirty-two people were neatly stacked in the center of the table -- ready for the next meal.

There seemed to be no end to the teamwork. Every morning young men directed traffic to an appropriate parking area.

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Between services, boys under twelve years of age went around with broomhandles -- with a nail on the end -- to pick up scraps of paper that might be littering the area. A tractor pulling a flatbed trailer made two or three trips around the grounds collecting the trash that may have been deposited in ninety brand-new plastic garbage containers.

Annual Meeting has been a continuous event for decades (200 years?). It has been perfected to a science. There is a "baby room" -- a special area for mothers to change babies, heat their food and feed them. Local brethren had outfitted the room with cribs, playpens and high-chairs; with rocking chairs for the mothers. Strollers were available.

Another consideration was demonstrated for senior members. A "cot room" each for men and women. Not only cots but easy chairs and rockers, too.

Portable toilets were delicately hidden behind plywood walls. Also provided: a long wash basin with four water faucets, large soap dispensers, lots of paper towels and several mirrors. Each evening professional equipment came in and pumped and cleaned the restrooms.

Old German Baptist Brethren arrived from great distances. In 1989 -- as in earlier years -- they went to the "baggage room" to store some of their luggage, check for messages and pick up lodging tickets. Local people were welcoming the travelers into their homes after creating partitions in the dining or family room, putting mattresses on the floor, moving the children temporarily to other areas so guests could use their beds. Wives, sisters

and mothers had been cooking and baking for days; the freezers were loaded with food for visiting family and friends.

Many hands -- many people -- kept the Annual Meeting moving like a well-oiled machine. Finally, five minutes after the closing prayer, men and boys were dismantling the benches. The younger children neatly stacked the stakes on pallets. Less than an hour later the council tent was down -- the dining tent shortly thereafter. The cookhouse plywood walls and brick firepit were leveled.

"Many hands" loaded the slightly used plumbing and electric supplies on a flatbed truck. Everything would be auctioned off on Saturday: bricks, lumber, copper tubing, pvc pipe, electrical, garbage pails, dishpans, mirrors.... New mattresses, used briefly in members homes for visiting brethren, would go up for bid.

Coming from frenetic Southern California, in an age of "instant everything", it was inspirational to see teamwork and recycling of resources. Live in a "disposable environment" long enough and you begin to question what happened to old-fashioned values and morals.

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Authors closing comment: This story was written for a Church of the Brethren or Mennonite publication. In light of all the vacancies in the California State Genealogical Alliance, this story might encourage subscribers to volunteer "many hands" and make light work for the Board. Readers are urged to submit their human interest stories to the Editor.

The Editor says "Amen" to that.