

## Muddy Creek Farm Library

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The sharp incline and decline of the road crossing Fairmount Hill in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, inspired its name, Cat’s Back Road. Perched on top of the “cat’s back” are three institutions: the retirement community known as Fairmount Homes, Home Messenger Library and Bookstore, and Muddy Creek Farm Library (MCFL). Each has its own purpose and ministry, and each is related in some way to the Weaverland Mennonite Conference, an Old Order Mennonite fellowship with 55 churches in seven states.

The purpose of Muddy Creek Farm Library (archival, book, and museum collection) is “to preserve the rich Christian faith and history of Anabaptism and to help the Old Order Mennonites and related groups retain and appreciate their heritage.” A familiar Bible verse supplements the purpose: “That the generation to come might know them, even the children which should be born; who should arise and declare them to their children” (Psalm 78:6). A library and archives serve two main purposes—preservation and education—but MCFL also believes that education should go beyond facts and information and lead to inspiration for Christian living.



*Muddy Creek Farm Library shares its building with Weaverland Mennonite Conference Home Messenger Library and Bookstore. (Photos courtesy of James K. Nolt)*



## Beginnings

Today, the library's location atop Fairmount Hill means that the library overlooks the Conestoga River. The name "Muddy Creek" reflects the fact that the library began on the farm of Amos B. Hoover along Muddy Creek Road. The story of the library is rooted in Hoover's unique experiences.

Amos B. Hoover, born on September 9, 1933, was the youngest child of Amos N. and Ella K. (Burkholder) Hoover.<sup>1</sup> His mother died before he was six months old, and his father died when he was three years old. Eventually, Hoover went to live with his Burkholder grandparents.

Growing up with older people nurtured an interest in history, and Amos Hoover longed to know more about his deceased parents. After marrying Nora B. Martin on May 1, 1954, and buying a farm along Muddy Creek Road that fall, he began his first major history project: researching and publishing a book about his Burkholder family.<sup>2</sup> This work further developed Hoover's love of history and put him in touch with people who encouraged his interest. These helpful friends included Ira D. Landis, a Mennonite historian who founded the Lancaster Mennonite Historical Society in 1958, about the time Hoover published his Burkholder book. Others encouraged him to collect memories from elderly church members and to begin keeping a diary, which developed into a journal of oral history as he recorded his conversations with older people.

Ira Landis introduced Amos Hoover to the Eastern Mennonite Associated Libraries and Archives, which further expanded his range of contacts, stretching them beyond Pennsylvania. For example, by 1965, Hoover was corresponding with J. C. Wenger, historian and Goshen College professor in Goshen, Indiana, and in 1968, Delbert Gratz,<sup>3</sup> librarian at Bluffton College, in Bluffton, Ohio, personally brought Hoover a 1780 *Martyrs Mirror* printed in Pirmasens, Germany. Perhaps most significantly, Hoover developed a close friendship with Amish historian David Luthy of Pathway Heritage Historical Library in Aylmer, Ontario. Muddy Creek Farm Library has over 9,000 pages of correspondence between Hoover and Luthy, beginning in 1972, that covers historical, bibliographic, and related matters and fills four feet of shelf space.

One way that Amos Hoover gave back to his friends and Mennonite historical libraries was his acquisition of some original copper plates that Jan Luyken created to illustrate the 1685 Dutch *Martyrs Mirror*. In 1977, after several years of searching and negotiating, he bought seven plates, retaining two for Muddy Creek Farm Library and selling five to other institutions.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed account of the history of MCFL, see Alvin Hoover, "1956–2016: Highlights of Muddy Creek Farm Library," *Muddy Creek Review* 7 (2016): 4ff. This issue also contains other articles about MCFL and its holdings.

<sup>2</sup> Amos B. Hoover, comp., *Daniel S. and Anna W. Burkholder Family, 1833-1957* (Adamstown, PA: n.p., 1957).

<sup>3</sup> See Alvin Hoover, "1956–2016: Highlights of Muddy Creek Farm Library," for names of other helpful people, such as historian and hymnologist Martin Ressler, historian and folk artist Isaac Clarence Kulp, and others.

<sup>4</sup> An art collector bought the other twenty-three copper plates, but when the collector died in 1988, Robert Kreider from North Newton, Kansas, purchased them. The inter-Mennonite Martyrs Mirror Trust was formed, a *Mirror of the Martyrs* traveling educational exhibit developed, and a descriptive book with the same title published.

During the 1960s, Hoover began earnestly collecting books to study and document the history of Old Order Mennonites and related groups. Documenting provenance was important to Hoover, and the signatures inside the books were often as significant as the books themselves.

Hoover's private collection of books and archival materials eventually outgrew a room above his family's farmhouse kitchen, so Muddy Creek Farm Library found a new home in a two-story addition to Amos and Nora's house, which officially opened on January 19, 1980.

A third aspect of Hoover's collection was also growing: artifacts. Although not his main interest, they illustrated history in a way that books and manuscripts could not, especially for children. Thus, a "museum" became an important part of Muddy Creek Farm Library.

### **From a Private to a Church-Related Library**

As Amos Hoover entered his 60s, he realized that MCFL could not exist permanently as a private collection. After careful discussion, he allowed his private collection to become a church institution as part of Mennonite Gospel Missions, a Weaverland Mennonite Conference 501(c)(3) organization. A board was formed on October 26, 1999, to give oversight to the collection.

Muddy Creek Farm Library also received a new building. Excavation began on the premises of Fairmount Homes on September 11, 2001, and construction was finished on July 29, 2002. From the beginning, Home Messenger Library and Bookstore has rented the west side of the building from MCFL. This sister organization publishes pamphlets (under Weaverland Publications) and *Home Messenger*, the Weaverland Mennonite Conference newsletter.

During this time of transition, the books were cataloged using computer software, an important part of moving them in an organized manner. As the library transitioned to a church institution and a more public and secure location, more people entrusted it with their old family Bibles or other treasures, whether donated, sold, or placed with Muddy Creek Farm Library on permanent loan. There, all family members could have convenient access to them.

In 2019, David Luthy told Hoover that he was looking for a new home for Pathway Heritage Historical Library, which is perhaps the most extensive Amish collection of historical materials. It was agreed that Muddy Creek Farm Library would house the Pathway collection in a separate room of the library and Pathway would retain ownership. Muddy Creek transported about three-fourths of the collection to its facility and cataloged everything. In the meantime, the Pathway board decided to develop several traveling exhibits to visit Amish historical libraries to serve as teaching tools. MCFL and Pathway Heritage Historical Library plan to collaborate further with mutual benefit.<sup>5</sup>

### **Preservation**

Muddy Creek Farm Library preserves and stores books and archival materials in a climate-controlled and fire-protected environment. To maximize storage space, the main room uses shelves on tracks that are moved with a hand-turned crank. Shelves, file cabinets, and cabinets add space.

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<sup>5</sup> Further description of the valuable Pathway collection is beyond the scope of this article.

Computer software assigns each book a number and insures that a desired item can always be located by multiple users. The museum artifacts are in the process of being more completely cataloged.

Since Froschauer Bibles were so vitally important to Swiss Anabaptists, the library has tried to acquire many editions and variant copies of this Bible. It owns two copies of the 1531 first edition and recently acquired a prototype edition, which was published in six installments from 1524 through 1529 during the translation process. (There are differences between the prototype editions and the 1531 first edition.) MCFL has made a similar effort to collect the editions and variants of the *Ausbund*. One copy has beautiful Fraktur notations by its owner, Hans Reist.

Other collection highlights include:

- *Martyrs Mirrors*: about 190 copies, including 1660 Dutch, 1685 Dutch, 1749 Ephrata German, and 1780 Pirmasens (Palatinate) German editions, plus virtually all the subsequent German and English printings
- Bibles: about 1,500 complete Bibles, mostly in German, English, and Dutch, plus New Testaments
- Songbooks: about 750 German and 120 English
- Property deeds: about 420
- Fraktur: about 900
- People in the genealogy database: about 373,000
- Periodicals: over 150 titles
- Artifacts: several thousand
- Archival boxes: about 1,000 small and 150 large boxes housing personal papers, institutional collections, and objects



Some of the many copies of the Ausbund shelved at Muddy Creek Farm Library.  
(Photo courtesy of James K. Nolt)

The collection includes some very special pieces, such as the *Martyrs Mirror* that belonged to Bishop Christian Burkholder (1746–1809), a noted Mennonite leader in Lancaster County. On June 24, 1980, Amos purchased this treasure, which contains valuable Burkholder family history.

MCFL wants to balance the goals of preservation and education. If materials are never seen, their preservation becomes meaningless. But if materials are frequently handled, they will no longer be preserved. Muddy Creek has some facsimile editions to show the essence of an old book while protecting the priceless, fragile original. These are particularly useful for school tours.

## Publications

Publication efforts supplement the work of preservation and aim to find meaning and inspiration in the library's holdings. Amos Hoover reprinted the Froschauer Bible in 1975 in conjunction with Hutterites. He persevered in publishing work even though the initial lack of interest was disappointing.

To date, the most significant publication originating through Muddy Creek Farm Library is *The Jonas Martin Era, 1875–1925*, edited by Amos Hoover. Based on a chest full of letters that Bishop Martin received while leading the conservative branch of Lancaster Mennonites that formed the Old Order Mennonite Church in Pennsylvania in 1893, the book was printed in 1982 and reprinted in 2018.

In 2018, Hoover published *German Language, Cradle of Our Heritage*, based on his notes, observations, and interviews “witnessed and interpreted...[from] 1946 through 2018.”<sup>6</sup>

The library also publishes a periodical, *Muddy Creek Review*, which describes itself as “an annual publication serving the historical interests of the Old Order Mennonites and related groups.” It began in 2010 and is available by subscription. (To subscribe, contact MCHL by mail or phone.) Recent issues typically have 44 pages and numerous color illustrations. The *Review* includes articles about local Mennonite history as well as articles on broader Anabaptist themes, such as “Thomas von Imbroich and His Writings” (2014) and “*Wisconsin v. Yoder* Supreme Court Case, 50 Year Anniversary: 1972–2022” (2022). Articles also address significant anniversaries, such as “Wanderings Through Colonial Groffdale” (2017) and “A Glimpse at the Weaverland Settlement” (2023), which focused on the 300th anniversaries of these settlements.

## Exhibits and Tours

The first educational exhibit at MCFL was the *Mirror of the Martyrs* exhibit, not surprising considering Hoover's role in acquiring some original copper plates. Special displays typically remain for one to three years. In 2017, a display commemorated the 300th anniversary of the Groffdale settlement. From about 2019 to 2022, the library hosted *Opportunity and Conscience: Mennonite Immigration to Pennsylvania*, a mobile exhibit organized by the Mennonite Heritage

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<sup>6</sup> Amos B. Hoover, *German Language, Cradle of Our Heritage: A Study of the Importance of the Pennsylvania German Language and the Struggles in Maintaining It in a Modern English Environment* (Ephrata, PA: A. B. Hoover, 2018), [3].



Center in Harleysville, Pennsylvania.<sup>7</sup> In 2023, a display about the 300th anniversary of the Weaverland area opened. As noted above, an article in *Muddy Creek Review* often accompanies a display.

Throughout the years, various family and school groups have visited Muddy Creek Farm Library, but in 2020, the library began proactively inviting schools to visit. Since then, more schools, especially parochial and conservative Mennonite schools, and homeschool groups have visited. Most students are fascinated when they receive a printout of a five-generation ancestor chart from the genealogy database.

A typical tour consists of an optional slide presentation and visits to the library and archives, the special exhibit, and the museum. The museum consists of three sections: Domestic, Agriculture and Shop, and Church. Visitors can also take a self-guided tour by reading the descriptive panels accompanying the exhibits or using the 68-page *Catalog of Museum Exhibit*, published in 2009. Many visitors, including scholarly groups and seekers, come with specific questions or requests about the Anabaptist/Mennonite life and faith.



A section of Muddy Creek Farm Library's permanent museum exhibit devoted to domestic life and crafts.  
(Photo courtesy of James K. Nolt)

Muddy Creek occasionally sponsors public meetings, sometimes in collaboration with Swiss Pioneer Preservation Associates, a local entity with similar goals. In September 2023, MCFL hosted the national Old Order Historical Meeting. That same year, the library also gave tours of the Weaverland Valley as part of the 300th anniversary of that Mennonite settlement.

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<sup>7</sup> This exhibit was later moved to the Nicholas Stoltzfus Homestead in Wyomissing, Pennsylvania.



*A temporary display highlighting the Weaverland Valley 300th anniversary, 1723-2023, an example of special exhibits occasionally mounted by Muddy Creek Farm Library.  
(Photo courtesy of James K. Nolt)*

### **Treasuring the Past and the Future**

The story of the beginning, growth, and development of Muddy Creek Farm Library is interesting, and so are the stories housed on the library's shelves. If you visit the library, be sure to view the beautiful scenery in the valley on each side of the "cat's back." The view includes the scenes of some significant and interesting history documented inside the library.

MCFL's goal to preserve the past is also future-oriented: it preserves the past so future generations may know and do. The library also archives current books printed by conservative Mennonite organizations such as Weaverland Publications, Christian Aid Ministries, Grace Press, and others. Publications in Russian, Romanian, and other languages now join old German and Dutch books on the library shelves.

The MCFL board, consisting of nine members,<sup>8</sup> holds quarterly meetings that are open to interested people. Attendees are welcome to share a new book or experience during the "show and tell" portion of the meeting.

Years ago, Amos Hoover said that he sensed a need for someone to "stand in the gap" (Ezekiel 22:30) to preserve Mennonite history. Muddy Creek Farm Library has filled a niche and by God's grace will continue to do so.

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<sup>8</sup> All board members are part of Weaverland Mennonite Conference. Lloyd Weiler is the chairman.

While in prison and facing death, the Apostle Paul wrote, “Bring...the books, but especially the parchments” (2 Timothy 4:13). This has become a MCFL motto. Paul probably wanted to see these precious documents again, and likely he was concerned that the divine truths written on them would be preserved and spread further. May the divine truths in the books and parchments at Muddy Creek Farm Library likewise be preserved and propagated.

The current library hours are Monday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Other times are by appointment. Call in advance if desiring an appointment with the archivist. MCFL offers a few historical book titles for sale (listed in *Muddy Creek Review*), and visitors can also shop at the Home Messenger Bookstore across the lobby.

**Erratum**

5/10/2024: Changes made to sentences on page 101 beginning with “May the divine truths...” and “The current library hours...”