Montezuma Mennonites keep the faith,
page 14

PLUS:
• Get away to the White House Farm Bed and Breakfast, page 31
• Try some Mennonite simple country fare, page 38
When you turn west off Interstate 75 at exit 127, south of Perry, Georgia suddenly seems like another world, something far from Georgia. Silos and dairy farms have a certain look to them. The German influence on Pennsylvania farming perhaps has an echo in this part of the state.

One reason may be the presence of a strong Amish Mennonite community in Middle Georgia. Although the sect’s history here isn’t as old as it is in Pennsylvania, as they only arrived 50 years ago last year, they’re as much a fixture around Montezuma as they are around York, Penn. While no one calls Middle Georgia “Dutch” country, the Amish Mennonite community that lives and works along Highway 26 has staked a claim in Georgia that makes folks think of them as part of the social makeup of the region.

The use of the term “Dutch” to describe these folks in Pennsylvania is a misnomer. English speakers unaccustomed to German misunderstood the German word “Deutsch,” meaning German. People calling themselves both Amish and Mennonite came to Pennsylvania because founder William Penn wanted his colony to be open to religious people of all faiths. “A holy experiment,” he called it. And he

Lela Brenneman, a first-grade teacher for 27 years at the Montezuma Mennonite School, engages children in vigorous play, a vital element of Amish Mennonite family life.

"Our aim would be for people to see Jesus in our lives and not just our lifestyle."

—Michael Yoder
invited them to participate in it.

With missionary zeal as part of their way of life, the Amish and Mennonite religious immigrants who settled there in the 18th century began a community whose descendants have spread to 22 states, Canada and other countries.

Just who are these people?

Both Amish and Mennonites represent a break from European Protestantism. Both arise from the Anabaptists, a very conservative and traditional Reformation-era sect that espoused adult baptism and separation from the larger society. Persecuted as heretics by Catholics and Protestants, they fled to mountainous areas, took up farming, withdrew from contemporary society and held services in homes rather than churches.

In the early 16th century, a young Dutch priest named Menno Simons joined the Anabaptist movement, and from his teaching and preaching descended Mennonites. The term was originally derogatory, according to Bishop Donnie Swartzentruber of the Montezuma community, because it derived from the word “Menists” coined by Simons’ critics. “But we’re followers of Christ,” says Bishop Swartzentruber, “not followers of one man.”

More than a century and a half later, Swiss Bishop Jacob Amman broke from the Mennonites and his followers were dubbed “Amish.”

Flash forward to the 18th century, when members of both groups arrived in Pennsylvania to participate in Penn’s “holy experiment.” The two groups agree as to basic ideas regarding adult and believers’ baptism, nonresistance (taken from the Sermon on the Mount) and fundamental Biblical doctrine. But they differ in dress, approach to technology, form of worship service and some interpretations of the Bible.

What motivated these 10 to 15 families to come from Virginia to Georgia in 1953? “The arrival of the Navy in Virginia Beach kind of crowded us out,” says Bishop Swartzentruber, who points out that more than 100 families now sustain three churches in the Montezuma area—a phenomenal growth rate.

Visitors quickly recognize their attire: The women wear plain, usually solid-colored dresses with hems at mid-calf, and white caps on the bunned and never-cut hair. They wear no make-up. The men wear plain clothing, beards and, sometimes, suspenders and brimmed hats.

But while Old Order Amish drive horse-and-buggy rigs, plow with animal power, and eschew electricity and modern conveniences, Georgia’s Amish Mennonites deftly wheel automobiles around their farm-centered environs and eagerly embrace the aspects of modern life that foster their vision of God, community and family.

“Have you seen our Web site?” asks Edna Yoder who, with her husband, Crist, owns the White House Farm Bed and Breakfast near Montezuma, where guests can experience their farm lifestyle (see “Getaway,” page 31). “It loads a lit-
Deborah Yoder (left) and Eunice Overholt, two barefoot Mennonite girls in their simple dress and gauzy caps, survey a summer's day on Elmer Hershberger's farm.

ttle slowly sometimes," she continues, bouncing her grandson on her knee. This community has warmly embraced selected features of modern life beyond tractors and electric ovens. But don't look for them at the movies. Or watching television and listening to radios. Or attending fairs and carnivals.

At the other end of Mennonite Church Road, where it intersects Georgia Highway 26, Yoder's Deitsch Haus restaurant and the nearby gift shop function as beacons for the community, showcasing its members and their considerable business acumen. Brothers Michael and Benjamin Yoder manage the restaurant and bakery. The boys are among the nine children of Alva and Sarah Yoder, one of the pioneering families. Since its founding in 1984, the restaurant has drawn hungry customers from far and near.

Across the parking lot from the restaurant is a gift shop, managed by John and Linda Yoder. While some items are made in the Montezuma community, the quilts typically come from outside the area. There are dolls, books about Mennonite life and history and intriguing, country-style gifts. Jellies, jams and preserves come from communities in the Midwest.

“Our lifestyle and our way of doing things get to be a focus of people’s attention,” says Michael, 37, who sports a neat short beard, blue shirt and dark pants.

He says the seeming melding of tradition and modernity in this group is an evolution. For the first years the community was here, it reflected mostly an Amish lifestyle. “The basic principles haven’t changed, but our appearance may be a bit different from what it was then. Our goal is to live a godly life and to be a witness to the people in the community who we associate with,” he continues. “We’re just living as close to Bible principles as we can and, therefore, we look different. Our aim would be for people to see Jesus in our lives and not just our lifestyle.”

Their school system is integral to that lifestyle. Pete Whitt, principal, explains how it guides youngsters to...
Pecan groves are a lovely part of the scenery and an important income producer on most of the Middle Georgia Mennonite farms.

the eighth grade in a Bible-based curriculum. “But it’s a complete curriculum,” he says of the Christian Light Education program, based in Harrisonburg, Va. Content includes math, history and geography.

Four teachers and an assistant instruct the school’s 58 or so young-

Diana Yoder displays a handmade quilt available for sale at Yoder’s Gift Shop, near the Yoder’s Deitsch Haus restaurant.

sters. Whitt says teachers can be trained at institutes in Virginia and Pennsylvania. After completing eighth grade, children continue their studies at home. The boys study trades, according to whatever business their fathers operate, and the girls learn homemaking, gardening and sewing.

Girls who don’t marry may become nurses or teachers, Pete says. In any case, at about age 16 or 18, they take the GED—and tend to score very well. “We’re not bragging about that,” demurs Bishop Swartzentruber. “But passing the GED has been no problem.”

Swartzentruber, who farms and raises chickens, has established a welding shop for his son, Wendell, 22.

Family is central to this system of values, Bishop Swartzentruber.

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Hay bales dot the Mennonite countryside, as seen here on the farm of Freeman Wingard.

points out. “We encourage group games and plenty of playing together,” he says. Despite the rigorous emphasis on duty, God and family, there are no glum spirits in this community.

The influence of Georgia’s Amish Mennonites extends beyond its members to the larger society, according to local leaders. Longtime Macon County resident Bill Sawyer, president of the county chamber of commerce and CEO of the county-wide development authority, lauds their contributions.

“They’re some of the most benevolent individuals I’ve ever met in my life,” he says, warming to the subject. “To a man, woman and child, they are a group that exemplifies Christianity. If there’s a disaster, they’re the first or second group on the scene.”

Last year’s 50th anniversary year seemed like a big deal to people who aren’t members of the community, but not for community members themselves. Life goes on among this seemingly never-changing band of families. The next half-century promises to be pretty much just like the last one, with community members keeping neat farms, doing their chores, cooking at the restaurant, raising their kids and praising God in the manner they have chosen for their people.

Decatur-based freelance writer Jane Garvey grew up in Middle Georgia, not far from the Mennonite community, and has fond memories of many family meals at the restaurant.
Enter the home of Crist and Edna Yoder in Montezuma, and if the wood-burning heater in their downstairs entrance doesn’t warm you, the Yoder family’s gracious, tender ways will.

After four of their five children moved into their own homes, the Amish Mennonite couple filled their almost-empty nest by opening three upstairs bedrooms to turn their half-century-old home into a bed-and-breakfast.

“We’ve always had a lot of company,” says Crist, a 52-year-old farmer and innkeeper. “When Mennonites from out of town come for weddings, funerals or church functions, we usually have some staying here. Basically, we’ve had a bed-and-breakfast for years; we just weren’t charging money. Edna likes company, so we did this to keep people in the house.”

Situated in the heart of this Amish Mennonite farming community, White House Farm features 250 acres of pastoral property on which the Yoders run a 175-head dairy operation and raise hay, corn, peanuts and sorghum. Their summer garden overflows with vegetables that keep the family’s three freezers stocked.

The Yoders occupy the downstairs area of their sprawling farmhouse, while the upstairs is open to visitors. The guest bedrooms are crisp, clean and tastefully decorated, each adhering to its theme—the Magnolia Room, Rose Room and Spring Bouquet Room. Guests are treated to a full country breakfast in the upstairs kitchen, where a refrigerator is stocked with soft drinks and snacks, and they may choose to dine in a screened-in gazebo off the upstairs hall.

Breakfast at White House Farm might include raspberry-stuffed French toast, country ham and oranges, or bacon, eggs and homemade biscuits. Truly in her element, Edna alters the menu daily, sometimes preparing traditional

Crist and Edna Yoder (left), owners of the White House Farm Bed and Breakfast in Montezuma, invite guests to enjoy traditional Mennonite cooking and life on their 250-acre dairy farm in the heart of Montezuma’s Amish Mennonite farming community.
Mennonite dishes, and other times, Southern fare.

Some bed-and-breakfasts enforce a “no-kids” policy; White House Farm encourages guests to bring children along for fun at the farm. There are cats to cuddle and dogs to pet, along with goats, peacocks, turkeys, ducks, geese, chickens and, of course, cows.

For the full-fledged farm-life feeling, Crist welcomes visitors to join him or his son, Crist III, at the barn for milking time, which is every day from 3 a.m. to 6 a.m. and again in the afternoon. Guests can simply watch the milking or try their hand at it. Kids can help Edna gather eggs or tend to goats. The Yoders invite guests to enjoy the farm as they wish—whether that means watching the grass grow from a comfy spot on the porch or helping with family chores.

Gathering to work is a tradition Mennonites have cherished for years. The Yoders’ house was built in 1959 as result of a “community frolic,” a gathering of men and their families with the goal of constructing a home in a short time. Crist Yoder was 8 years old when his parents, Christian and Anna, hosted the weekend frolic to build their home.

“Mother cooked a big meal and the men built the house,” he recalls. “You talk about fun—20 men and their families with children playing and lots of good food—that’s fun.”

Many homes in his community were built this way, says Crist, expressing regret over less-frequent frolics due to families working long hours to maintain their businesses.

Crist’s was one of the original Mennonite families that moved from Virginia to Montezuma in 1953. Seeking affordable land on which to raise expanding families, the group settled there. By the early 1960s, about 35 Mennonite families had moved to Montezuma. Crist estimates there are more than 100 families in the community.

Founded in 1954, the original Montezuma Mennonite Church remains the largest church in the area. Two additional churches—Clearview and Gospel Light—formed in 1988 to fill the growing community’s needs. Guests are welcome to attend Sunday services at any of the churches, which adhere to basic Bible beliefs with strong emphasis on family unity and land stewardship, according to Crist.

A jolly family prone to laughter, the Yoders enjoy recalling moments at White House Farm: In the 1980s, McDonald’s filmed a biscuit commercial here, and Crist was paid $1,000 a day for the use of his farm. “I told them they could do commercials year-round,” he says.

Taking advantage of the area’s lush green pastures and Holstein-speckled countryside, another crew visited the farm to film a commercial spot for the Georgia Lottery. “They had our son plow a smiley face out in a sorghum field,” Crist recalls.

The Yoders welcome all visits, be they from commercial crews or bed-and-breakfast guests. “It gives us opportunity to talk to people, to see another lifestyle,” Crist says.

When you visit, soak in their lifestyle. Milk a cow or feed the fowl to get a full-fledged farm-life feeling.
chickens. Dine at Yoder's Deitsch Haus or shop at Yoder's Country Market. Arrange to visit one of two nearby dairies, where up to 3,000 cows are milked daily.

Whether your idea of a getaway is resting peacefully in attractive surroundings or mingling with locals to learn their way of life, time spent at White House Farm is time well spent.

Jackie Kennedy is a freelance writer living in LaGrange.

For left: Crist Yoder takes a break from farm chores to share a smile with his 5-year-old granddaughter, Alison.

Left: The Magnolia Room features a four-poster bed with bright and cheerful accessories adhering to the room's flowery theme.

Details: White House Farm Bed and Breakfast, 1679 Mennonite Church Road, is 15 miles west of Interstate 75. Check-in is 3-6 p.m.; check-out is at 11 a.m. For reservations, call (478) 472-7942, (478) 957-6363 or (888) 472-7941. Visit the inn's Web site at www.whitehousefarmbnb.com.

Nearby attractions: National POW Museum and Andersonville National Historic Site and Civil War Village, Andersonville; Massee Lane Gardens and Georgia National Fairgrounds and Ag Center, Perry; and Jimmy Carter National Historic Site, Plains.
Simple country fare
Mennonite cooking takes a Southern spin in Georgia
BY JANE F. GARVEY

The minute my car hits south of Macon, I begin thinking about fried chicken at Yoder's Deitsch Haus, just outside of Montezuma. Eighteen-wheelers parked alongside the road near this simple country dining spot surely house drivers tucking into the hefty fare. Peanut pie and squash casserole are not among the dishes you're likely to find if dining among Pennsylvania's Mennonites; that's sausage-and-creamed-potato country.

At Yoder's, squash casserole, peanut pie and fried chicken are among the Southern-style house specialties. The fried chicken in Mary Emma Showalter's book, featured later in the article, is finished in the oven, as is the fried chicken at Yoder's. So that's perhaps a touch of "Mennonite magic" where fried chicken's concerned. Oven-finished chicken sure turns out good.

Food is not the only reason to dine at Yoder's Deitsch Haus. It's the atmosphere. It's the women in their simple single-color dresses and filmy bonnets, the men and their beards. It's like another world, and yet these ladies deftly cook for large crowds even as they're capable of handling a tractor with the best of them. A meal at Yoder's makes for a good break from the frantic world we inhabit.

The following recipes have been adapted from those prepared at Yoder's Deitsch Haus.

### Squash Casserole

<table>
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<td>4 eggs</td>
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<td>1/4 cup sugar</td>
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Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Melt 6 tablespoons margarine and reserve. Use 1 tablespoon of remaining margarine to grease a 2-quart baking dish; set aside. In a blender, crush crackers, half an individually wrapped package at a time, to fine crumbs; set aside.

In a separate bowl, beat eggs, melted margarine, sugar, salt, pepper, milk, onions and squash. Incorporate all but 1/4 cup of crumbs into mixture. Pour into greased baking dish. Scatter remaining crumbs on top; dot with remaining margarine cut into small pieces. Set casserole, uncovered, on a baking sheet to protect the oven, and bake until squash is soft and dish is puffy, about 2 hours. Let sit a few minutes before serving custard sets. Note: Yoder's serves their squash casserole topped with a cheese sauce. Serves 6-8.

### Fried Chicken

| 1 chicken, cut into 8 pieces |
| 2 cups bread flour |
| 1-1/2 teaspoons seasoned salt, or to taste |
| 1 teaspoon salt, or to taste |
| 1 teaspoon freshly ground white pepper, or to taste |
| 1/2 cup milk |
| 1 egg |
| 1 quart vegetable cooking oil |

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Rinse chicken under cold running water.
and shortening until crumbly. Divide
topping evenly among pies, gently
sprinkling a tablespoon at a time on
top of filling.

Bake 45 minutes or until filling is
set (when a knife comes out clean,
but moist). Cool pies on rack. Makes
3 (9-inch) pies.

### Sausage and Creamed Potatoes

1 pound sausage links
1 medium onion
Water
6-8 potatoes, peeled, cut into quarters
1-1/2 teaspoons salt
1/4 teaspoon pepper
2 tablespoons flour
1 cup milk

Cut sausage into 1/2-inch
lengths. Chop onion finely. Mix meat
and onion together and fry until
slightly brown. Add water to cover
and cook 10 minutes. Add potatoes
to meat and season. Cover and cook
until vegetables are done. Once vege-
tables are tender, make a paste of
flour and milk; add to mixture and
cook until thickened. Serves 6-8.

### Peanut Pie

1 (9-inch) deep-dish pie shell
1 cup old-fashioned-style (non-hydro-
genated) creamy peanut butter
2-1/2 to 3 cups confectioners sugar
2-1/2 cups whole milk, 1/3 cup
reserved
1-1/3 cups granulated sugar
1/4 teaspoon salt
1 tablespoon margarine
4 egg yolks
1/4 teaspoon vanilla
1/3 cup tapioca
1 can whipped topping

Preheat oven to 375 degrees. In
a bowl, combine dark-brown sugar,
egg and molasses; add warm
water/soda mixture. Divide and pour
into unbaked pie shells.

Prepare topping. With a pastry
blender, combine flour, brown sugar
and shortening until crumbly. Divide
topping evenly among pies, gently
sprinkling a tablespoon at a time on
top of filling.

Bake 45 minutes or until filling is
set (when a knife comes out clean,
but moist). Cool pies on rack. Makes
3 (9-inch) pies.
Sour Cream Cookies

1/2 cup shortening
2 cups sugar
1 teaspoon vanilla
2 eggs
4 cups flour
1/2 teaspoon salt
1 teaspoon soda
1 cup sour cream
1/4 cup sugar-and-cinnamon mixture

Grease baking sheet; set aside. Cream shortening and sugar together. Add vanilla. Add eggs and beat until fluffy. In a separate bowl, sift flour; add salt and soda, sift again. Add sifted dry ingredients to egg mixture alternately with sour cream; mix thoroughly. Drop by teaspoonfuls onto greased baking sheet, spaced 2-3 inches apart. Note: Cookies will spread as they bake. Sprinkle with sugar-and-cinnamon mixture. Bake at 375 degrees for about 12 minutes. With a flat spatula, remove cookies and let cool on a rack or cloth towel.

Makes 5 dozen.

Jane F. Garvey, a freelance writer living in Decatur, has driven out of her way for a plate of crispy fried chicken from Yoder’s Deitsch Haus.

A family affair

Another Mennonite-owned and operated restaurant, The Giesbrecht Haus, (above) on the square in Tennille, serves up entrees like fried chicken, baked ham, sweet-potato souffle, catfish, a large selection of vegetables and from-scratch pies.

Owners Rodney and Melva Giesbrecht and their family run a dairy farm in addition to the restaurant.

Sweet and Sour Chicken

Melva Giesbrecht, Davisboro
3 pounds chicken breasts, cut up
1 egg beaten
1 cup cornstarch
Salt, to taste
Garlic salt, to taste
Sauce
1 1/2 cups sugar
1/2 cup water
1 1/2 cup ketchup
4 teaspoons soy sauce
1/2 cup pineapple juice
1/2 cup vinegar
1 teaspoon salt
1 tablespoon orange juice concentrate

Dip chicken in beaten egg and shake in a bag with mixture of cornstarch, salt and garlic salt. Fry until lightly brown; set aside. In a saucepan, combine ingredients for sauce and cook until dissolved. Place chicken in baking dish. Pour sauce over chicken and bake at 350 degrees for 30 minutes or until done. Baste while baking.

June 2004