



The Dan Hershberger farm, later owned by Elmer M. Yoder, circa 1958. Courtesy of Alva Yoder Sr.

CHAPTER I

*The Early Years in Princess Anne County*

by Leroy Miller

THE FIRST AMISH FAMILIES ARRIVED IN Princess Anne County, Virginia, from Midland, Virginia, in 1900. At the time, the Fauquier County Amish community was disbanding, and three families from there moved to the Kempsville area. Daniel D. and Annie E. Hershberger and son, Simon; Ben and Lizzie Smoker and daughter, Maude; and the Christian F. Glick family settled on farms along Parliament Drive, known then as "the Turnpike." After a relatively brief time, the Glicks moved to the emerging Mennonite community at Fentress (Chesapeake's Mt. Pleasant area today). Dan Hershberger's farm along the west side of Parliament was later owned by Elmer M. Yoder. The farm buildings stood near the present entrance to the Ridgelea subdivision.

Elmer and Malinda Yoder, circa 1960. Courtesy of Lloyd Swartzentruber



Why only these three families chose

to settle at Kempsville is uncertain; however, it may have been part of the independent spirit that marked the Fauquier County Amish. According to David Luthy in his *The Amish in America*, former members of the Midland congregation set off in every direction—to Pennsylvania, Maryland, Ohio, Illinois, Mississippi, and Canada. In all likelihood, the nearby Norfolk market for farm produce and the lure of cheap land played a role in the Hershbergers', Smokers', and Glicks' choice of location. David Luthy cites the following 1891 ad in the Amish-Mennonite newspaper, *The Sugarcreek* [Ohio] *Budget*:

*\$1.00 per acre may seem CHEAP, but investors through us have made over 500 percent. Rare opportunities in the coming metropolis. Excursions on all Railways. For information and maps, address to Hon. John Sherman: M. W. Mason, Norfolk, Virginia.*

Apparently no Amish had taken the ad seriously, as nine years elapsed before any moved into the area. Even after the Hershbergers and Smokers arrival, two years passed before another Amish family joined them. In 1902, Crist and Elmira Swartz, with their several children, moved to Kempsville from the small Oyster Point Amish community

at Denbeigh—presently part of Newport News, Virginia. Originally from West Liberty, Ohio, the Swartzes had arrived at Denbeigh in 1900. Crist Swartz suffered from a respiratory ailment and heeding his doctor's advice, moved his family to a warmer climate.

In 1971, Crist and Elmira Swartz's daughter, Bertha, and their sons, Crist Jr., Floyd, and Grant were still living in Tidewater Virginia. That year, I interviewed Grant Swartz at his home in Norfolk's Fox Hall section. A sprightly gentleman, Grant in his mid-seventies recalled that "we lived in a little brown house on towards Greenwich from Ben Smokers." (The Kempsville Church of Christ now occupies the former site of Ben Smoker's farmstead.)

Like the Glicks before them, the Swartz family didn't make Kempsville their permanent home. Crist Swartz Sr. made his living as a timber buyer. "He was often away from home," Grant remembered. "We moved to Fairmount Park [Norfolk] in 1905, and Daddy furnished some of the lumber for the 1907 Jamestown Exposition."

As time passed, the Swartz family joined Fairmount Park Baptist Church and gradually lost contact with the Kempsville families. However, on rare occasions they would return for special meetings. Grant remembered attending an all-day service at the Kempsville Amish Church around 1920.

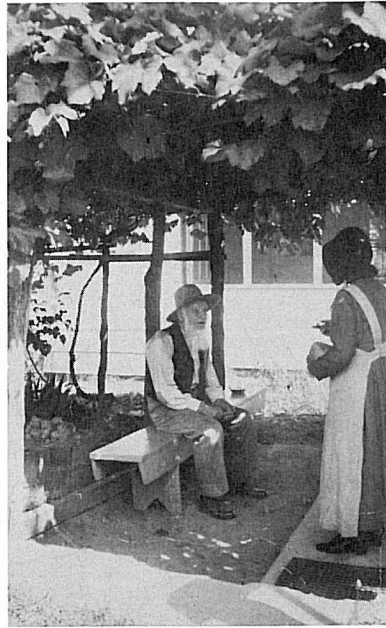
While the Kempsville Amish community saw no growth for years, its numbers more than doubled in 1907.

Elias Yoder, a widower, arrived with his adult sons: Milton "Milt" and his wife, Barbara, and their four sons; and Noah and his wife, Sadie; along with Pete and Sarah Kinsinger—all from Somerset County, Pennsylvania.

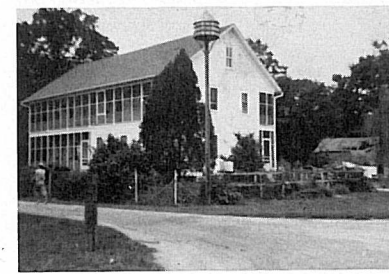
Living at Stuarts Draft, Virginia in 1970, the late Eli Yoder, Milt's oldest son, remembered his family's move to "Norfolk"—the name which Amish-Mennonites have long used to identify the Kempsville congregation, mainly because the mail out to Kempsville was delivered from the Norfolk post office. "Mother was always delicate ever since I can remember. The doctor advised we move to Colorado or southeast Virginia in hopes her health would improve."

The choice of locations didn't prove difficult for Milt and Barbara. Colorado seemed half a world away, far from Somerset, Pennsylvania. Virginia held far more appeal. Besides the shorter distance, the area had a milder climate than Pennsylvania. Also, Dan Hershberger's wife, Annie, was Milt and Noah Yoder's sister. "So, Grandpap [Elias] and Uncle Noah took a trip to Princess Anne County to investigate before they made up their minds to move," said Eli Yoder.

The Milt Yoders settled into an old Colonial house a half-mile northwest of Kempsville. The house stood on the west bank of the creek that runs under Princess Anne Road, several hundred feet west of Kempsville Baptist Church. Actually, a tributary to the eastern branch of the Elizabeth River, the creek was once an impressive waterway for



Noah E. Yoder, circa 1945. Courtesy of Ernest Yoder



The farmhouse built by Noah and Sadie Yoder, later owned by Eli Swartzentruber. It was located at the present corner of Overland Road and Overland Court, circa 1952. Courtesy of Mildred Swartzentruber

The Noah E. Yoder farm, circa 1945. Courtesy of Joseph A. Miller

sailing ships that docked at the Kemps Landing wharfs, pilings of which were still visible well into the twentieth century.

Eli Yoder recalled farming in Princess Anne County was different from what the Yoders had been accustomed to in Pennsylvania. "Pap always plowed deep back home, and did the same in Virginia. The locals shook their heads and said, 'All he's doin' is turnin' up old subsoil.' They told us too, that clover wouldn't grow there."

Eli continued, "Another thing was, when you rented land, some owners wouldn't allow you to use stable manure on the land. They claimed it spread weed seed. The first years, crops weren't the best, but they got better. We grew clover tall enough a man could put the blossoms in his pants' pocket without tearing them from the plants."

Between 1907 and 1943, Milt and Barbara first, and later their youngest son, Simon, and wife, Katie Ann, turned the place into a handsome farmstead. They razed the old Colonial house and replaced it with a large two-

story frame with a basement. A fine dairy barn was built, and when Milt and Barbara retired from farming, they added an adjoining *Dawdy Haus* ("Grandpa house").

Noah E. and Sadie Yoder had moved onto a farm across the creek from his brother Milton's. Though childless, in the course of time, they built an imposing three-story house with first- and second-story enclosed screen porches full-length along the north and south sides of the structure. The Eli Swartzentruber family last owned this place before selling it in 1952 for the Kempsville Heights subdivision.

Disaster struck the Milt and Simon Yoder farm one evening in the early 1930s. In 1995, Bertha Brenneman and her sister, Elva Beiler, recalled the scene. Their family, the Lloyd W. Yoders, lived half a mile away. "We were washing dishes and through the kitchen window we saw flames coming from the barn," Bertha said. "It was a huge fire."

Elva, four or five at the time, recalled the glow set off by the blaze: "Mother said afterwards it was so bright



you could have read the Bible or newspaper from our yard.”

The barn was rebuilt and remained until the mid-1960s when every trace of the farm buildings disappeared in the development of the Point O’ View subdivision. By then, the William J. Overholt family had owned the property more than twenty years, having bought it when the Simon M. Yoders moved to Stuarts Draft, Virginia, in 1943.

Lack of an ordained minister has long been a prime hindrance to an Amish community’s growth. That need was met with the arrival of preacher Elias Yoder in 1907; however, several more years would pass before there was any real increase at Kempsville. In fact, the number dwindled by two in 1910, when Ben and Lizzie Smoker moved back to their native Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

Smoker, a blacksmith and wagon builder, had built a large covered wagon for the journey. The late Eli M. Yoder, then twelve or thirteen, remembered the Smokers leaving Kempsville with several draft horses hitched to the big wagon, the farm dog trailing on a leash at the rear.

From that point on, growth, though sometimes slow, continued for more than forty years in the Kempsville Amish-Mennonite community. In late autumn 1910, newlyweds Noah C. and Katie Beachy arrived. The William S. Yoder family followed shortly after the turn of the year in 1911. (To avoid repetition here, further details of the



William S. Yoder story appear in chapter 5 by Viola [Yoder] Swartzentruber.)

The Daniel S. Beachy family began the trek from Meyersdale, Pennsylvania, to Kempsville on Monday, October 16, 1911. First off, they loaded the farm animals onto a railroad cattle car for the trip south. A young single fellow, Milton Bender, rode along in the car to care for the animals. Later the same day, Dan Beachy and his two oldest sons, Norman and Samuel, left Meyersdale driving a two-horse spring wagon and a single-horse buggy. Plans were made to arrive at Washington, D.C., 130 miles southeast, by Thursday afternoon. There, the men would join Mrs.

Ruth Swartzentruber, circa 1949, beside the dairy barn built by Noah Yoder. Courtesy of Mrs. Clark Yoder

Beachy and the rest of the family who had traveled from Pennsylvania by passenger train. Together, they would board the steamer for the overnight trip down the Potomac to Chesapeake Bay and on to Norfolk.

Events, however, didn’t turn out as planned. Almost sixty years later, in 1970, Daniel and Amanda Beachy’s third son, Joel, described the details in a letter. “On Thursday evening, we boarded the boat for Norfolk, expecting Father and the boys to arrive. They did not get there by departure time.”

With the whistle’s shrill farewell blast, the ship eased away from the dock, taking Amanda Beachy and the younger children, along with the worry over what might have happened with

Dan and his two sons. Their concern was soon put to rest when Dan Beachy came aboard at the ship’s first stop, several miles downriver at Alexandria, Virginia. One of the horses had become sick on the way from Meyersdale, and knowing he couldn’t get to Washington in time, Dan had taken a train to Alexandria.

The Beachys moved to a farm two miles north of Davis Corner—the intersection of Virginia Beach Boulevard and Newtown Road. The place was later owned by H. C. Moore, who operated a dairy farm there for many years.

Joel Beachy in his letter recalled their mailbox was more than a mile from home. After a time of putting up



Eli Swartzentruber on “moving day” 1952. Courtesy of Mrs. Clark Yoder

with the inconvenience, Daniel Beachy began circulating a petition around the neighborhood to have mail delivery nearer individual homes. One gentleman, misunderstanding the petition's intent, wanted no part of adding his signature. "No suh, cap'n, I can't do that," he said. "Seein,' I already belong to two lodges."

The Beachys were among the first farmers in the area to own a grain binder. Joel went with his father to pick up the new implement when it arrived at the Greenwich station. The disassembled parts were loaded onto the farm wagon and the pair set out for home. Stopping at the Davis Corner general store, Joel stayed with the wagon while Dan went inside to make a purchase. A bystander eyed the metal parts on the wagon bed. Automobiles were a rarity in 1912, and the curious fellow concluded he might be gazing at one of those modern wonders. "Say, boy," he addressed Joel. "Would that be one of them new gas machines you got there?"

With the arrival of the Beachys, the Kempsville Amish congregation had grown to seven households. The group also now had a second minister, with Dan having been ordained earlier in Pennsylvania. During 1912, the Noah Lees, Daniel D. Yoders, and Jonathan "Yonie" Beilers were among the families who arrived in Princess Anne County.

Numerous other Amish families moved to Kempsville over the next few years. Some learned quickly they hadn't found their Promised Land and left

after only a year or two. The farmland usually was less fertile than older, established communities. Poor drainage on the low flatlands sometimes resulted in late planting and poor crop yields.

A more debilitating problem, malaria, discouraged some Amish settlers. Dan Beachy's daughter, the late Elizabeth (Mrs. Jonas E.) Miller described to me in 1971, the effects of malaria. "One day you might feel rather well, then be unable to get out of bed the next. We took quinine until our ears rang, literally. You knew then it was time to stop.

"The John Swarey family moved into the area around 1913. John stayed sick and in bed most of the time they lived there. The Swareys stayed less than a year," Elizabeth remembered.

Despite the fact some settlers chose not to remain, the Kempsville Amish community grew steadily and by 1916, the congregation numbered fourteen households.

More details about the Kempsville Amish community's further development can be found in chapter 5 by Viola (Yoder) Swartzentruber and in chapter 9 by Andrew J. Hershberger.



**The Milt Yoder farm, later owned by William J. Overholt, circa 1960. Courtesy of Henry Overholt**



**The location of the Milt Yoder/William Overholt farm photographed from Overland Court in 1995. Courtesy of Leon R. Zook**