

## CHAPTER 9

### *Joe I. and Mary (Miller) Hershberger Sr. Family*

by Andrew J. Hershberger

AMISH-MENNONITE FAMILIES SETTLED in Princess Anne County for various reasons—the mild climate, inexpensive farmland, the nearby Norfolk City Market, and relatives already living there. While one or another of those factors may have played into the Joe I. Hershberger family's move in January 1922, to southeastern Virginia, they came primarily to escape Ohio's Bing Act.

Passed by the General Assembly, the law required all Ohio children under eighteen to attend a state certified school. Under certain conditions, a work permit could be obtained at age sixteen. Heavy fines and jail time were imposed on those who refused to comply. The law went into effect in

1921, and caused much dismay to Amish parents.

Our family was immediately caught up in the controversy. We were then living in Geauga County east of Cleveland. My two oldest brothers, Jonas, fifteen, and Jake, thirteen, had already completed the eighth grade. The new county school superintendent was determined to enforce the mandate to the letter; so, the two Hershberger boys faced several years of attendance at public high school—a policy the Amish church strongly resisted. Tensions ran high on both sides, with neither one inclined to yield ground. Dad was issued several warnings, then arrested and held overnight in the Chardon village jail.

**Joe I. Hershberger Sr. raking hay in Holland Road field, circa 1933, near the present Holland Plaza. Courtesy of Andrew Hershberger**



The situation had become intolerable for my parents, and they began actively planning to leave Ohio. Several years earlier, Dad (Joe I.) had traveled with several church brethren to a number of Southern states. Having gotten a favorable impression of the Amish community at Kempsville, Dad now contacted a cousin, Eli S. Miller, who was living there. Within a short time, we made arrangements to rent a farm from Fred Krahenbill, a mile-and-a-half east of Kempsville. The farm buildings were off Princess Anne Road near present Kempsville Meadows Elementary School.

Since plans were to leave Ohio by January 1, 1922, the Hershberger home bustled with activity. December was rapidly approaching. Getting ready for our dispersal sale brought mixed feelings. We seven children—five boys and two girls—had been born here. The place had a new barn, and Dads had talked about a new house. Here were many fond memories of family gatherings with aunts, uncles, and cousins. Leaving this pleasant spot for a strange community hundreds of miles away, did not seem very exciting.

Dad engaged Walter Andrews—famed as one of northern Ohio's best auctioneers—to handle our sale. Farmers came from near and far on auction day. The large crowd's good mood was further nourished by free bowls of oyster stew dipped from a large outdoor kettle. Farm equipment, horses, cattle, and miscellaneous items were sold at auction; however, the farm

did not sell until several years later when it was purchased by the Clevertons, two brothers, from Cleveland.

We loaded a railroad boxcar with household furnishings, along with everything else we intended to take along to Virginia. The canned goods—fruits and vegetables—were packed in barrels of oats to protect the glass jars from breaking. Shortly after New Year's, 1922, our family boarded a southbound passenger train. We stopped off briefly while enroute to visit Dad's brother, Noah, and family at Plain City, Ohio.

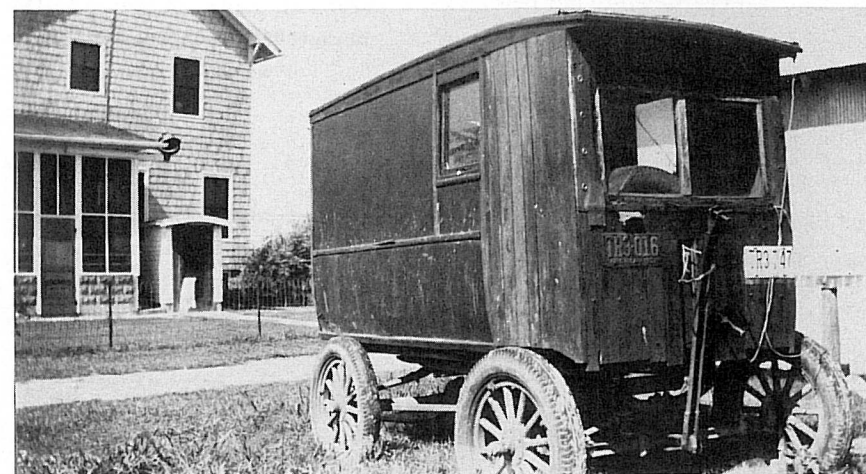
Arriving at Norfolk's Union Station on a mild, sunny day, we must have been a curious sight dressed in heavy winter overcoats. Joe Slabaugh, son of "Sep" Slabaugh, of Moyock, North Carolina, met us at the train station. Joe owned a car and worked for the Noah E. Yoders. He drove us to the Yoders where we learned plans to move into the rented house would be delayed by a week. As a result, our family separated into three groups to share the kind hospitality of Noah and Sadie Yoder, the Jake Stutzmans, and Eli S. Millers.

There were many adjustments, some difficult, as we settled into our new surroundings. We found the climate pleasant and the native people friendly; however, their Southern accent sometimes left us wondering what had been said. Having had no contact with persons of another race in Ohio, it took some time to feel at ease with our black neighbors. We children were frightened simply because they were different from what we had been accustomed to.



**"Grandma," Mrs. Joe I. Hershberger, circa 1969. Courtesy of Andrew Hershberger**

**Joe I. Hershberger's market wagon, circa 1936. Courtesy of C. H. "Curly" Byler**



Our rented farm had little resemblance to what we had left in Ohio. The poor soil and shabby buildings left much to be desired. The house itself teemed with rats—upstairs, downstairs—we saw them as they scampered across the floor in broad daylight. At night they squealed and gnawed behind the walls and ceilings. Besides their large number, these rats were unique in that some were spotted white, apparently the result of white or albino animals crossing with the usually brown ones.

Chiggers, also called jiggers, were another plague new to us Northerners. The parasites would burrow under the skin, raising an itchy welt. Scratching gave temporary relief but brought more misery later with a siege of infected "Virginia" sores. We also contended with homesickness—the invisible "bug" that got into one's heart, touching the emotions, with the effects far more lasting than a mere redbug bite.

Like many of the Kempsville Church folks, our parents also began attending Norfolk's curbside market soon after we arrived in the area. Early

Saturday morning, Mom and Dad would set out on the ten-to-twelve-mile trek with horse-drawn market wagon, loaded with farm produce. The Kempsville Amish-Mennonites were noted for their scrapple, sausage, hominy, dressed poultry, eggs, milk, cream and butter, along with garden fruits and vegetables in season.

The Kempsville folks, several families from the Moyock, North Carolina Amish community, and Mennonites from the Fentress-Mt. Pleasant area of Norfolk County, converged on Brewer Street, to join other farmers and merchants from surrounding rural counties. Brewer Street became a beehive of activity as vendors of all descriptions set up shop curbside. Wagons and Model T Ford trucks lined the street for several blocks. The open-air market was usually profitable and proved a financial lifesaver for farm families caught in the 1930s Great Depression.

One Saturday that first spring, 1922, we had a near tragedy at home. Mom and Dad were away at market in Norfolk. We children were home alone. The four oldest, Jonas, Jake, Joe, and Elmer were outside playing ball. Little sisters, Fannie, three, and Katie, one, awakened, hungry for breakfast. As a confident six-year-old, I set about frying eggs for the girls. I had often watched Mother do it, so I wasn't expecting any problems. Our kerosene cookstove was primed and preheated with gasoline. I set the can too near the burner and it quickly caught fire.



**Sadie Miller (left) with Katie and Fannie Hershberger, circa 1935. Courtesy of Joseph J. Overholt**

Grabbing it up, I spilled gas and scattered flames as I ran across the kitchen floor. The girls' and my screams quickly brought the older boys, who managed to smother the blaze with blankets. Even now, I shudder to think of what could have happened.

A more humorous incident occurred that same spring with Dad's first attempt at plowing with a tractor. Unlike the Geauga County Amish, who forbade the use of tractors for crop farming, the Kempsville Church allowed them; so Dad bought a Sampson tractor and plow. Trying out this strange new equipment became a family affair as we gathered to watch. The tractor came abreast, with the plow turning the ground nicely. We all waved happily as Dad waved back. The slight distraction and his inexperience were just enough cause for him to miss the turn at the end of the field. Despite

Dad's earnest shouts of "Whoa! Whoa!" the horseless machine ran headlong into the ditch.

Princess Anne County's secondary roads of that time were unimproved and poorly maintained. Only as funds were available would county officials hire a private owner-operator of a tractor and King Drag to level the dirt road surface. The road—Salem then, Princess Anne now—past our house was first gravelled in 1922. Only after the state took over the county system in the 1930s did the area's roads begin to show marked improvement.

The brothers, Noah E. and Milton Yoder were among those who contracted for road work. They owned a big Twentieth Century steam tractor, a machine that at least one elderly Princess Anne resident mistook for something else. As the smoke belching monster headed her way, she reportedly called out, "Look a yonder, chilrun. They's a big ole train engine comin' up the road."

On one occasion, Noah and Milton found themselves at odds with a prominent county judge. As their contract would take them past the judge's home, he asked to have his private lane graded on county time. Unwilling to compromise their integrity, Noah and Milton refused. Sometime later, Noah was called for jury duty. Asking to be exempted for religious reasons, Noah understood his request had been granted. The judge, however, had the last word by sentencing Noah to a week in jail for failing to

appear as requested. Noah was permitted to serve his time on weekends.

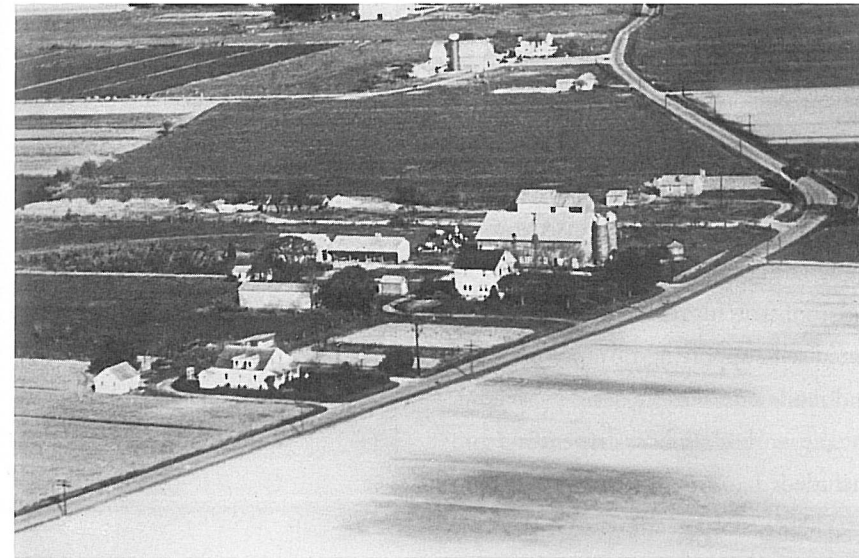
After a year on the Fred Krahenbill farm, my parents rented a farm owned by Noah E. Yoder. Known as the Jake Stutzman Farm, it was located along what is now Euclid Road. We lived there four years. Jonas Millers owned the farm last before selling most of the land for housing development and the Norfolk-Virginia Beach Expressway.

While there on the Stutzman place, Dad bought a tract of approximately 340 acres, and later 175 acres more, on

Holland Swamp Road—Holland Road today. The tract stretched along the north side of the road from what is now 3740 to 4380 Holland Road. Later Dad divided the land into three parcels—two which became farms for brothers Jake and Jonas. He farmed the third part with the help of us younger children until his retirement in 1941.

At that time, Dad offered brother Elmer and me a three-way partnership. He supplied the equipment, while we furnished the labor and split costs and proceeds 50-25-25 percent. That worked well for two years, however during the period Elmer and I both married—he, Sarah Bontrager and I, Lizzie Wengerd. Elmer and Sarah then bought a farm near Ross Gallup's store at Shipp's Corner and moved there at the end of 1942. Elmers later sold the property, part of which became Cardinal Estates mobile home park.

Dad and I continued the partnership another year, after which he sold the home place to me and Lizzie. He and Mother kept five acres for their Dawdy Haus (Grandparents' home) and



**Joe I. Hershberger bought this parcel of land in 1926. Seen here circa 1954, it is located at 3740 to 4830 Holland Road. Courtesy of Andrew Hershberger**

**Elmer and Andrew Hershberger holding a rattlesnake they killed while stacking peanut hay, circa 1933, at the present site of Holland Plaza Shopping Center. Courtesy of Andrew Hershberger**



farmette. Dad was killed in a traffic accident at Gap, Pennsylvania, in November 1952. Mother continued living there until June 1970, when she moved with us to Due West, South Carolina. Mother and Dad's five-acre plot is presently the site of Messiah Lutheran Church.

The Holland Swamp land was not a desirable tract in the beginning. For one thing, it was three or more miles from Kempsville—the center of the Amish community; and besides, there was good reason for the "Swamp" label. During heavy rains, the road and fields were like a shallow lake, under several inches to two or more feet of water.

Even the local native farmers were less than impressed with Dad's purchase. Years afterward, during the 1950s, Alf Newman of London Bridge, told Leroy Miller, "I used to ride up and down Holland Swamp Road in the mule cart with my Daddy. Daddy would say, 'Mr. Hershberger's gonna end up in the po' house with that useless piece of land.' But now it's as good farmland as you can find around here. The Mennonites showed us old Southerners how to farm."

The change had come about by digging big drainage ditches with a dragline power shovel, and sound rules of farming Amish and Mennonites learned generations ago on submarginal land in Europe. Crushed limestone was applied to the sour land along with stable manure and commercial fertilizer. We also used crop rotation—unlike the old Southern practice of year after year

raising corn, tobacco, or cotton until the soil would no longer produce.

Since we needed to erect farm buildings, Dad bought a sawmill, moved it to Holland Swamp Road and began sawing logs. All the lumber for the barn and other outbuildings came from our woods. The farmhouse, however, was purchased as a kit from Gordon Van Tyne of Chicago. Everything in the package—precut lumber, plaster, and roofing—was of fine quality and cost all of \$3,900. The house, a two-story, had eight rooms, a bath, and several porches.

I have never forgotten the barn raising. Needing to get the 44-by-100-foot dairy and horse barn up as quickly as possible, Dad hired a noted barn builder from Geauga County, Ohio, along with several more carpenters. The loft-roof structure was made of laminated self-supporting ribs, preformed and made on site. The design was new for the work crew, boss carpenter included.

There was open contention the morning of the raising, as the crew bickered with the boss over how to get the heavy, unwieldy arches into place. The boss prevailed with his plan at the start, but little was accomplished through the forenoon. After lunch, the boss gave in to the crew's plan, which worked well. By quitting time the ribs had all been set.

That is not the end of the story. Tired from the long hard day and lulled by the balmy evening, the men decided they could wait until morning to brace

#### FAMILIES AT KEMPSVILLE

IN 1922

Daniel Beachy  
Joe I. Hershberger  
Simon Hershberger  
Pete Kinsinger  
Noah Lee  
Eli S. Miller  
Joseph S. Overholt  
Simon Schrock  
Jake Stutzman  
Christian Swartzentruber  
Eli M. Yoder  
Elias Yoder  
Iddo Yoder  
Lloyd W. Yoder  
Milton E. Yoder  
Noah E. Yoder  
Noah W. Yoder  
William S. Yoder

the superstructure. Imagine, waking the next morning to find the whole set of spans down, twisted and broken. During the night, a sudden storm had flattened the accomplishment of the previous day. Had the boss yielded to the advice of the other workmen, there would have been ample time to put in the bracing. Such are life's lessons, though often learned a bit too late.

#### THE RAILROAD'S IMPORTANCE

Before improved, hard-surface roads and the semi-truck, railroads were of primary importance for moving goods to market. Spur lines of the Norfolk and Southern Railroad ran like spider webs all across Princess Anne County. Though all three farms—Krahenbill, Stutzman, and Holland Swamp Road—were a couple miles apart, neither was less than a half-mile from one of these rail lines.

Trains held a special fascination for me. Unlike today's dull diesel engine, there was something unusual about a coal-powered steam locomotive, black smoke pouring from the stack and wheels clacking along the rails with a dozen cars in tow. Long after the engine noise had faded, one could mark the train's progress as the shrill whistle screamed a warning at some distant crossing.

One of the area's most important rail lines linked Munden Point with Euclid—along Southern Boulevard, just east of Witchduck Road—where the tracks joined the mainline between Norfolk and the oceanfront. The train

included eight or ten freight cars, a mail car, and passenger coach and made numerous stops along the way, to and from "down in the county."

Strawberries and potatoes were important cash crops at that time for farmers in southern Princess Anne County. By horse and wagon and Model T trucks they hauled their produce to loading stations along the tracks. Carloads of strawberries were iced at the ice plant in Pungo, ready for the big city markets in Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York.

A near tragedy occurred on the railroad near our home in March of 1927, following a late winter snow-storm. During the peak of the storm, high winds ripped loose the overhead electric trolley cable along the Norfolk-oceanfront tracks. With the live wire down, the steel rails became charged with high voltage electricity.

We were living on the Stutzman farm then. Mom's nephew, Noah J. B. Miller had arrived some months earlier from Holmes County, Ohio, and had taken a job working at Rudy Yoders on Witchduck Road. The morning after the storm, Noah decided to pay our family a visit. Riding horseback, he would cross the tracks about a quarter-mile from our place. Unaware of the lethal force underfoot, Noah allowed the horse to step on the electrified rail. The horse went down instantly as Noah, unharmed, slid off the back of the dying animal. Needless to say, Noah was a shaken young man when he arrived at our door shortly afterward.

## He Held His Place

by Leroy Miller

The day had begun like a thousand others in my years as a construction subcontractor. By mid-forenoon, though, September 14, 1965, would be etched into my memory as one of the most painful days of my life. Helper Titus Overholt, and I had arrived at the job site along Parliament Drive around 8:00 a.m. As we unloaded tools and set up for work, Titus remarked that his dad, Henry Overholt, along with John Henry Yoder and the brothers, Joe I. Jr. and Jacob "Jake" Hershberger, had left early that morning on a trip to Alabama. Plans were to look for rural farmland that could be bought by Amish-Mennonite families who were selling their Virginia Beach land.

About 9:15, my wife, Sarah, drove up. "There's been a serious accident," she said. "The men have been taken to the hospital in Franklin [Virginia]. The word is that Jake was killed."

Titus left immediately for home at Mears Corner, while I stumbled about in what seemed an incredibly bad dream. However, shortly afterward, a phone conversation with Jake's daughter-in-law, Rosa, confirmed the numbing reality: "Jake's gone. Henry and John Henry are critically hurt. Joe I. has some bruises." Rosa said.

"It just doesn't seem fair," I responded, my voice breaking with emotion. "It just doesn't seem fair."

The men were west of Holland, along Virginia Route 189, approximately a mile from its intersection with US 258. Joe I. was driving, Jake napped on the passenger's side, while Henry and John Henry were quiet and apparently dozing in the back seat. Two semitrailer trucks approached in the oncoming lane. Suddenly, a car behind the rear truck swung out to pass. The lead truck attempted to signal the auto back, but the driver ignored the warning. Joe I. pulled the steering wheel hard right and hit the brakes, to no avail. In an instant the cars ground together in a shattering crash.

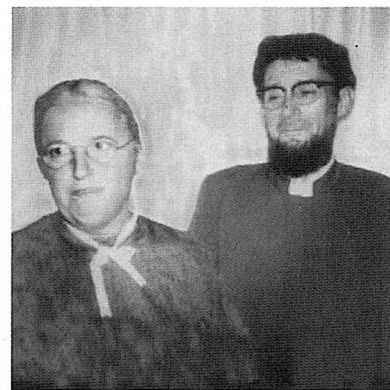
Three days later at the Kempsville Amish-Mennonite Church, minister David Miller of Thomas, Oklahoma, spoke what many of the more than eight hundred persons at the funeral had felt at word of the fatal accident. "My first thought was, 'No! It can't be that God has called Home this man who was so very busy with His work.'"

Indeed, Jake, fifty-seven, had been a busy churchman the last dozen or so years of his life—minister and bishop at Kempsville, evangelist, and secretary-treasurer of Amish-Mennonite Aid, a position that had taken him numerous times to Germany and Central America, in behalf of Amish-Mennonite Aid's relief and missions' program. Since 1953, his weekly news and devotional column, "Lynnhaven Gleanings," had been a weekly feature in *The Sugarcreek* [Ohio] *Budget*.

While the wider Amish-Mennonite community lost a leader with Jake's death, much more, his beloved Matilda, "The only girl I ever dated," had lost her husband of thirty-six years. Their



A "gathering" at Jacob Hershbergers' home, 1958. Prior to 1970, black was the required color of all cars. Courtesy of Harold Overholt



Jacob and Matilda Hershberger, circa 1959. Courtesy of Edna Nisly

nine adult children had lost Dad; the grandchildren would grow up without Grandpa, and I, Leroy Miller, had lost a personal friend, who had influenced my growing-up years second only to my parents.

From age eight, I had relished his Sunday sermons, most of which included one or more illustrative anecdotes. With simple, descriptive words his stories would drive home a Biblical truth even a small boy could understand.

Jake had also been my sixth and seventh grade teacher from January 1949 through May 1950, at Kempsville Mennonite School. Though we lacked facilities and equipment that public schools consider absolutely essential, Jake's ability to improvise overcame some obstacles. In a simple demonstration with a lighted bulb and a small world globe, he taught us the cycle of the seasons and the basics of the solar system—a lesson I have never forgotten. Beyond that, Jake rein-

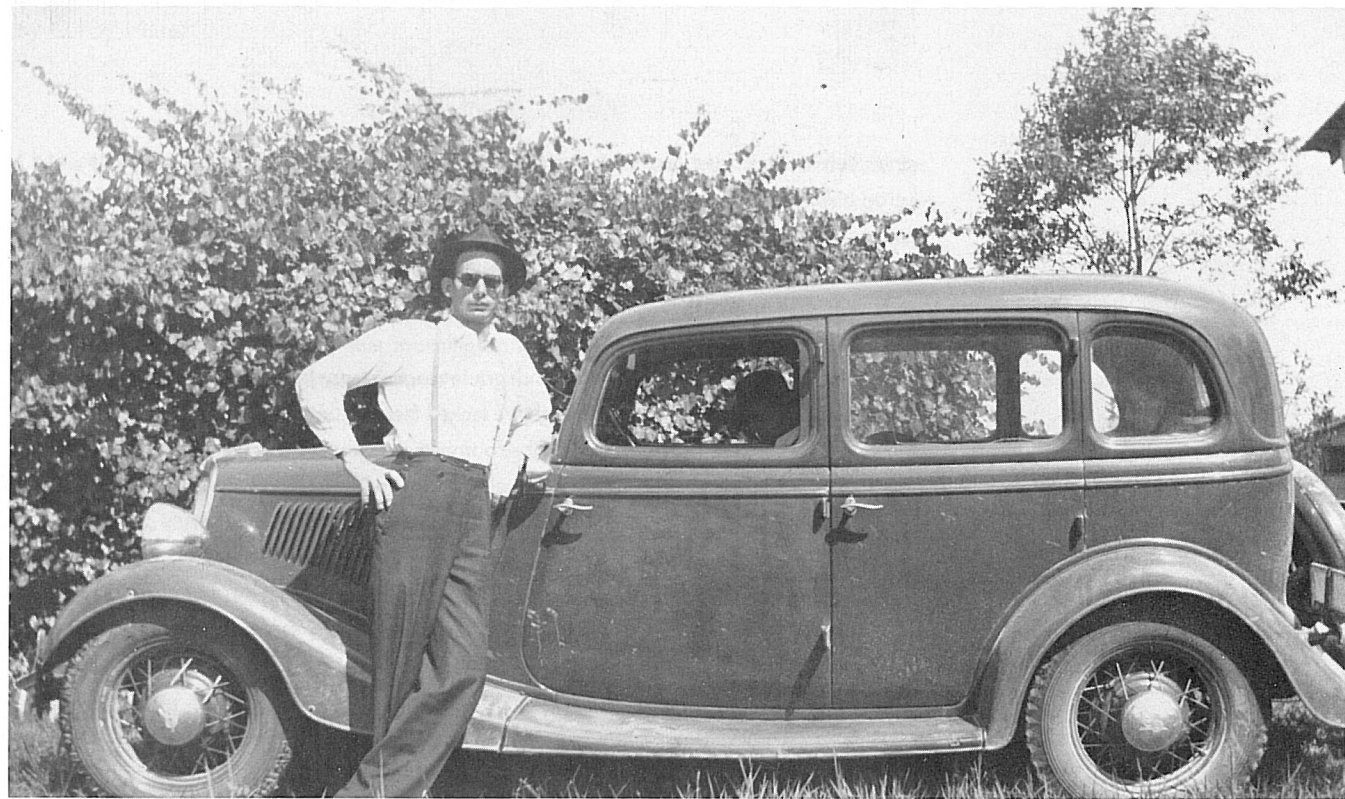
forced, by word and example in the classroom, the values we were learning from our parents at home: New Testament faith rooted in Jesus' teachings of compassionate love, honesty, and fairness.

Today as I remember Jake Hershberger, I call to mind several lines read at his funeral from Edwin Markham's poem, "Lincoln, the Man of the People."

... He held his place—  
Held the long purpose like a growing tree—  
Held on through blame and faltered not at praise,  
And when he fell in whirlwind, he went down  
As when a kingly cedar green with boughs  
Goes down with a great shout upon the hills  
And leaves a lonesome place against the sky.

Traveling in behalf of Amish-Mennonite Aid: Jacob J. Hershberger, circa 1963. Courtesy of Leroy Miller



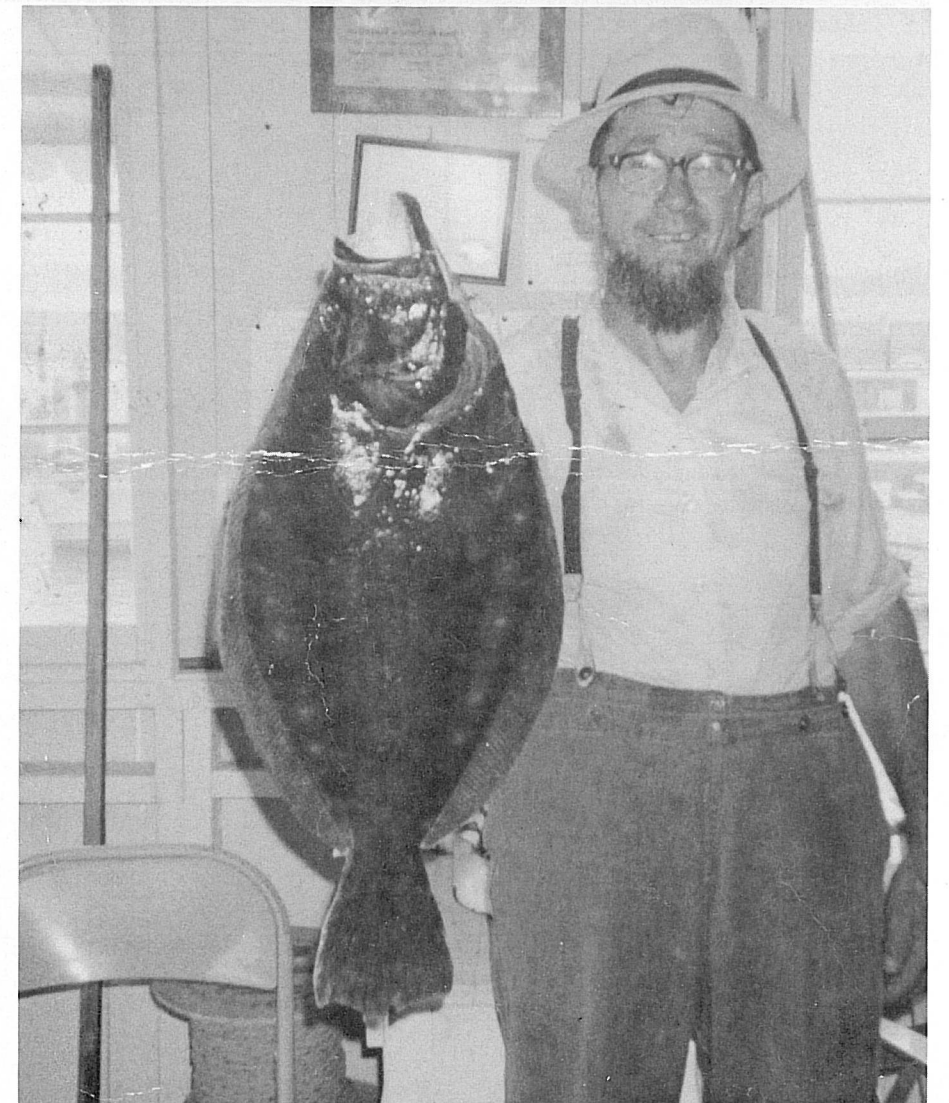


For almost half a century, Kempsville and its environs was home. The church on Parliament Drive; the farm on Holland Road; the Christian day school our eight children attended on Overland Road; the many friends and neighbors are all locked in our memories. Nevertheless, like my parents who left their Ohio homes in 1922, due to changing circumstances, by the early 1960s we too began to feel the nudging to move to a more rural area. Farming along Holland Road was becoming all but infeasible with the boom in housing and commercial development. In spite of that, I remember the feeling of guilt and betrayal of a trust that March morning when I phoned the buyer who had been pressing us to sell.

At that moment it was easy to forget the long miles of walking to and from school; the terrible roads of a bygone era; the land clearing; and digging of ditches by hand. While all of that might seem reason enough to prod one into moving on, life has taught me that difficult experiences somehow have a way of becoming most precious.

**Elmer Hershberger enjoying his car, circa 1936. Courtesy of C. H. "Curly" Byler**

**Noah and Simon Hershberger, circa 1933, and Mary and Betty Gingerich, circa 1936. These two boys married these two girls. Courtesy of Simon Hershberger**



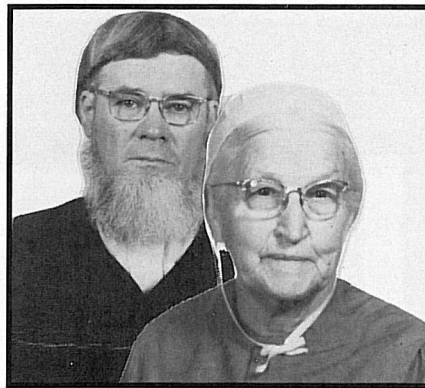
**Many Amish-Mennonite farmers enjoyed fishing in their spare time. Bishop Jake Hershberger is holding a nice flounder he caught, circa 1964. Courtesy of Jacob Hershberger Jr.**



**Jacob Hershberger farm at 3800 Holland Road, circa 1960. Courtesy of Edna Nisly**



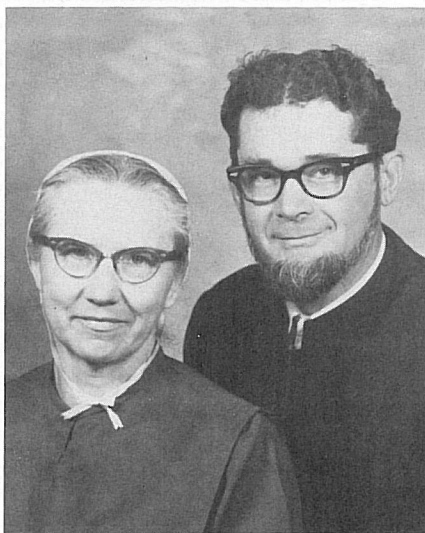
**Mrs. Jacob (Tillie) Hershberger with several grandchildren, circa 1957. Courtesy of Joseph Hershberger**



**Jonas and Katie Hershberger, circa 1963. Courtesy of Simon Hershberger**



**Joe and Sadie Hershberger, circa 1950. Courtesy of Joseph Hershberger**



**Andrew and Elizabeth Hershberger, circa 1973. Courtesy of Mrs. Ellen Overholt**