

Cast your bread upon the waters

by Erma M. Miller

(Editor's note: Many names and some circumstances have been changed to preserve privacy.)

A surprise in the mail – A letter arrived in our mail box at 137 Elm Street in London, dated October 9, 2004. Curious, I opened the letter and read these lines:

Hello Erma,
Greetings in our Savior's holy Name. You are probably wondering who I am? Well, do you remember teaching a pupil by the name of Jacob Peachey? In Dover, Delaware. He would like to talk to you. We have a phone and would you call and leave us your number on our voice mail. Our number is *****. I am Jacob's second wife.... Hoping to hear from you. Yours sincerely....

I did remember Jacob and some challenges that went with his presence in my classroom. In fact, I must have written about the problem in a letter to my family. That letter seems to be lost, but I have a letter from my sister telling of guests being in the home: "Mama is reading your letter out loud. They are discussing about that

n a u g h t y boy, Jacob Peachey." And now, fifty-two years later, why did Jacob want to talk with me? I calculated that now he would be a man in his mid-sixties.

Jacob was one of my students when I taught at

Apple Grove, an Amish school near Dover, Delaware. I had gone there in September 1950 to teach for two years, with limited preparation.

To understand the import of my eventual contact with Jacob, some background on my life and how I came to teach at an Amish school is necessary.

Remembering my childhood – I grew up in a large family on a farm in southwestern Pennsylvania. School was a great experience for me. I admired and respected the teachers. I saved my school workbooks and other papers, kept them in a cardboard box, and used them to teach my younger brothers and sisters. When it was my turn to guard the cows when they grazed in an unfenced area, my younger siblings and my box of materials would be with me and I would seat myself on a large raised rock and conduct a classroom in imitation of Miss Peck, my first grade teacher. I dreamed of being a school teacher when I grew up.

To my delight, two church papers came to our home – *Beams of Light* when I was quite young and *Youth's Christian Companion* later. These papers influenced my thinking of how to live and what I would want to do with my life. *Youth's Christian Companion* was more advanced with stories of characters that I wanted to imitate. I developed a desire to be a missionary to Africa and to study at Eastern Mennonite College to prepare for service, especially to be a school teacher. I felt God's call on my life and I wanted to find God's will for my life and to fit into His plan. Teaching and missionary work were on my mind, but I also wanted to have a family.

Figuring out God's will – I completed the eight years of education required by the State of Pennsylvania for elementary school and did not go on to high school. I wondered what God's will was for my future, including the question of marriage. It was exciting to think that God would lead me in these areas.

During the school year of 1949-1950, I did housework and child care for a successful teacher, Alvina Livengood. Here I learned concepts of teaching, and my desire to be a teacher grew. It was during this time that my father approached me. He knew of my desire for education, but he also knew that our congregation was very cautious about higher education and



Communication by letter was crucial when Erma was teaching. Here, she's actually at home, reading a letter her parents kept for her.



Erma, on the far right, with friends and family in the room where she lived while teaching.

until recently had had a policy against members enrolling in college away from the home community.

My father and the bishop – Early in the summer of 1950, the bishop of our church informed my father that the Amish in Dover, Delaware, needed a teacher for their church school, beginning in the upcoming September. My father took the inquiry seriously and informed me of it. “Erma,” said my father, “teaching there may help you know whether or not to go to college.”

As I considered this, I thought, “Does this mean it is God’s will?” There was a conflict in accepting this, because I had promised my sister Lena Anna I would work for her in September. My assumption that requests always represent God’s directions didn’t hold out. But Papa’s counsel influenced me. My sister, though disappointed, consented to release me. I then discussed the opportunity with the bishop and Barbara Maust who some years earlier had left my home community to teach in another Amish school in Delaware. On June 5, I wrote in my diary, “Maybe I’ll take the Delaware school.”

Spiritual and mental absorption – During that summer before departure for Delaware, I urgently wanted to absorb as much spiritual and mental input as I could. The task ahead seemed large to me as an inexperienced and untrained teacher.

I was encouraged by the bishop, who told me of his own experience as a teacher. On his first day of teaching, as he walked to the school, he felt very inadequate. He knelt by a stump and prayed and experienced God’s help. He said to me, “God will help you.”

I was apprehensive about leaving behind the familiar and going to a whole new set of people whose culture differed from mine. But I was also consoled and comforted in knowing that I was not leaving God and He was not leaving me.



Erma on the porch of Apple Grove School in Dover, Delaware.

Arrival at Dover (September, 1950) – Upon arriving in Delaware, Barbara Maust took me to the boarding place arranged by the school board: a local Amish home. They had a teenaged daughter, Lena. My room was upstairs and I had a window facing Route 2, a road that led to the city of Dover. Late at night I heard the clip-clop of horse hooves as the buggies went by. I was given an oil lamp. The room had a bed, a library table, a chair, a long shelf along a wall, and a closet. I ate breakfast and supper with the family. I packed my lunches and carried them to school. My salary, after deducting lodging, would be \$17.50 per week.

The Apple Grove School was about five minutes walking distance from the home where I boarded. When I arrived at the school, I took stock of the setting and the available books and supplies. A small hallway immediately inside the entrance was equipped with shelves and coat hooks and a sink with a hand pump at one end. I soon learned to keep water on hand to prime the pump. I was responsible to start the fire in the coal-burning stove when needed. The coal was on a pile outside the school building. I carried the kindling for starting the fire from my new home.

The predecessor’s advice – Andy R. Byler introduced me to some of the school policies and ways of building upkeep. They oiled the wood floor periodically. He had taught the school in the previous year, was very helpful, and gave good advice. “When the students rise up and say, ‘Andy R. did it this way,’” he told me, “just tell them, ‘I am not Andy R., I am Erma Bender.’ I often would hear the children say ‘Mary did it this way.’ I would tell them who I was.”

Now a teacher – I had twenty-seven students on the first day. I put a stand-up name card on each desk. I was pleased with how soon I knew their names.

At the beginning, I made a schedule. School opened at 9:00 a.m. with recesses in the forenoon (15 minutes), at noon (one hour) with lunch time included, and in the afternoon (15 minutes). After the students had played hard during the noon recess, I opened the afternoon session reading to them a chapter or two of a continued story from a selected book. This helped the students to settle down to classroom work. Most of

the books were classic children’s stories, perhaps *Heidi* along with others.

At first I dismissed school at 4:00 p.m. Then I learned that parents were wondering why their children came home later than expected. I learned that dismissal had been a half hour earlier in previous years. I had patterned the schedule after my memory of elementary school in Springs, Pennsylvania. This included opening each school with Bible reading and explana-



The home where Erma lived while teaching in the Amish school.

tions, prayer, and singing. After I was informed of the parents' wishes for dismissal time, I complied. I never will know how many things I changed from the previous or preferred methods.

The delayed upper grades – Students in grades 7 and 8 were required by Delaware law to be in school at least one hundred days of the school year. They began to straggle in during October to join the lower grades that had begun in September in order to meet their requirement of 160 days. The younger students would tell me what to expect of the incoming students. Most were well behaved as the ranks swelled from about twenty-seven to forty-five in my one-room school of eight grades. But a few problems did occur and my full school room was a challenge.

I felt poorly equipped to deal with all eight grades. I labored over the selection of subject material and resources, especially for the upper grades. I found usable math books and good English and spelling workbooks. Occasionally my landlord went to an auction and bought inexpensive used books for his daughter Lena. I read some of them for relaxation. Later he bought books for me and I took them to school for the students to read after their lessons for the day were completed.

My Saturdays were busy with room cleaning, laundry, ironing, lesson preparation, and writing letters. One Saturday in September when I was working at the schoolhouse, I saw a jet airplane for the first time.

Homesickness and a trip home – I received a letter one day saying that my mother was sick, so my friend Barbara took me to a telephone to call home. Mom was on the mend by then. But Barbara suggested we make the trip home when the Maple Glen church communion service was scheduled—six weeks after I had left home. This was the longest time ever for me away from home. When I met my parents, I thought something was wrong. I thought their faces looked wider and flatter than before, but I noticed that even the house had a different look. It was so good to sing at the communion service and hear our preacher preach. It helped my homesickness. I dreaded to go back to Delaware, but with God's help I would face the unknown again.

Back to the school room – Those first graders were so enjoyable to teach. I used Miss Peck's way of teaching the first graders their words. I wrote the names of the nouns on a card. On the ledge of the blackboard, I placed pictures of Father, Mother, Dick and Jane, and Baby. We would go through an exercise of each child putting the card at the right place. I was enjoying my job. I wrote in a letter to home:

There are about six songs we can sing now pretty well. Wish I would have plenty of English Bibles to give out. Some of the children said they had a New Testament at home in English and they hunted the New Testament verses we learned in chapel, but wished they'd have an English Bible so they could read all of them. Some don't have any English Testaments of any kind....This morning I read and talked on the Second Coming of Christ. Some of the verses we learned were John 3:16 and the Scripture "Even as Moses lifted up the serpent...." That morning I drew a snake on a pole and told the story of Israelites and told them we are like them if we neglect to look to Jesus.

I am not sure how I decided which Scriptures and songs to use in the morning devotions with the children. It encouraged me when Annie and Sylvia came early. They would come to the desk and leaf through my Bible, fingering it as if it were precious. They said their mother was glad that I taught the Bible and sang and prayed with the school children. I was excited; I felt fulfilled and enjoyed teaching when the children mastered their lessons. I felt that I was using the gifts God had given me.

A cross-cultural encounter – In the absence of electricity in the home where I stayed, I was glad for the kerosene lamp and heater in my room. After a while, both needed to be filled. I thought I was getting along all right, but was greatly shocked when the lamp globe broke and shattered to the floor without a reason. An Aladdin lamp in the main part of the house seemed frightful to me. At times it would increase in brightness and eventually would flame up.

Other amenities were missing. I ironed my clothes with a gas iron. I did my laundry by hand. Instead of an indoor bathroom and tub, I was given a bucket for carrying water to my room and access to an outhouse. I really missed the conveniences we had at home, but the absence of a bathtub in my parental home during my early childhood was good preparation for this experience in Delaware.

Photography – Photography is shunned by the Amish. On one occasion a visitor offered to take pictures of the school with its Amish children. I preferred that he would not, but he assured me that the children would not be aware of it. After my visitors left to return home, I noticed that the children were very downcast. I realized before they told me that they were grieving over the fact that their pictures had been taken. I was grieved also. I felt I had betrayed their trust in me. What would the school board do? What would the parents or the church say? I expressed my sadness to God and asked Him to take

care of the situation. None of the Amish spoke to me about the incident.

Strength in the Word – The Bible and prayer remained important in my life. There were days when I didn't feel really confident of my teaching or have lesson plans and seat work that were effective. I would go home tired and search the Scriptures and pour out my heart to God. I found strength in consistently having my own time of reading Scripture and seeking God. I was depending on Him to guide me.

A professional visitor – A notice arrived one day from C. F. Yake, member of the Mennonite Board of Education and editor of *Youth's Christian Companion*, the paper that had inspired and motivated me in my Christian life. He offered to visit my school. I looked forward to the visit with excitement, but felt intimidated. The day came and the visit went very well. I was encouraged and the children seemed to enjoy it. He told a story of two frogs that were jumping along and landed in a bucket filled with cream. The first frog gave up, quit trying to get out, and drowned. The second frog didn't give up, but kept trying to get out. He paddled and paddled until finally the cream turned into butter. Victoriously he climbed onto the chunk of butter and onto the edge of the pail, and jumped to freedom! The moral of the story: Never Give Up. It was a good day for the school and for me. I was encouraged to faithfully plod on and do my best to please God and promote His kingdom.

Barbara and I visited Greenwood Mennonite Church, perhaps about twice a month. I learned to love that church. This was a boost to my needy spirit. We almost always were invited to homes after the services at the Greenwood Church for the noon meal. The hospitality of these people helped me in my spells of loneliness and motivated me to be a witness for Jesus.

End of first year and summer vacation – My friend Mildred and I kept comparing notes with each other by mail. She also was teaching school, but in the home community. We decided to attend summer school at Eastern Mennonite College that summer. This gave me a taste of college for six weeks. The summer also was a wonderful time of being with my family and my friends at church and to participate in church youth functions.

David Miller and I had our first date on August 26, 1951. A few more dates followed before I returned to Delaware and we agreed to continue our relationship by writing letters. The letters flowed during my second year at Apple Grove School and many memories are preserved in our box of love letters.

The second year of teaching – When I arrived in Delaware for my second year of teaching, I knew what to expect much better than I did the first year. But the second year would have its own challenges, especially when the room would fill up with the arrival of the 7th and 8th graders with an enrollment increase from about 27 to 45 students!

One day I received a letter from a mother who was ready to send two children, one to seventh grade and one to the eighth. I consented, but little did I know how one of them, Jacob, would change the atmosphere of my school room. Jacob and his siblings had attended the public school previously and were more at ease with the English language than most of the Amish students. They were good students, but I noticed that Jacob was sly in getting away with things and could disturb the atmosphere of the whole school room. If I had my back turned to him, he often would pull another stunt. I found myself calling for the Lord's help.

Those first graders – I especially enjoyed teaching the lower grades. Teaching first graders to read was so fulfilling. I remember Sarah's beautiful blue eyes when she started reading stories of Dick, Jane and baby out of the primer book. Her smile and twinkling eyes fulfilled my dream of teaching.

When Lonnie fainted – I had rung the bell to end recess. As the children were filing to their seats, Lonnie knocked his ankle against one of the iron desk legs. He fainted and fell to the floor. His face was white. I was at his side trying to care for him when Annie came in and saw Lonnie; she fainted. Immediately I raised my voice and told everyone to go back out to the playground. I didn't want any more stu-

Erma, I didn't know it, and you didn't know it, but you planted a seed in my life.



Erma on her porch in London, surrounded by the flowers that helped her win the title to "Prettiest Porch in London" (from the local paper).

dents fainting. I was scared, but recalled the time when I was in grade school and my classmate, Sadie, fainted. But now I was the teacher. I wetted a cloth, wrung it out, and placed it on Lonnie's forehead. He regained consciousness. After it was all over, I felt that I had handled the case quite well. The Lord helped me in those difficult times.

The mobile library – At a scheduled time, the van from the Dover public library came to the school, loaded with

library books. The children checked out books, and I did too. I remember reading about Dr. Salk and his new discovery of polio vaccine. I wanted to learn as much as I could in order to be a better teacher. Not all of the children enjoyed reading, but many soaked up those library books with great eagerness. I felt so happy to see those children read those books.

Ammon the song leader – I had told the school board that I would not be able to lead the Friday afternoon sessions of singing the German church songs. They thought they could handle that by getting a seventh grader to lead the singing. Ammon, one of Jonas Yoder’s sons, did a very good job of leading in the style of the “foresingers” of their church. He started the song by singing the first few syllables, after which the rest would join in. Ammon with his fair complexion would get red in the face and his voice was forceful and loud. The children did really well in singing German every Friday afternoon.

The Christmas program – As the Christmas season approached, I was thinking of putting on a Christmas program. I asked Catherine Scheffel, one of my creative friends back home, to write a play. Lena, my landlord’s daughter, helped make the costumes. The parts were assigned to students and rehearsed. The program was a success with many parents in attendance along with students and parents from Barbara Maust’s school. I didn’t know until later that a former teacher in my school had planned and rehearsed a Christmas program only to have the board prohibit its performance. I can hardly believe that I tried and succeeded to do a Christmas program in that Amish community. But Barbara’s school also did a Christmas program that year and my school attended it.

Concerns and challenges – One day one of the Amish ministers came to the school and asked to talk with me on the porch. The children remained in their seats. I hardly could believe what I was hearing. He did not like that I had Bible reading and prayer and singing and the teaching I was giving in the morning to open up the school day. “Soon they will think that they know more than the preachers do,” he explained. I returned to the school room and tried to go on with teaching. Did the children know at all what had transpired? I somehow managed to keep on teaching that afternoon. I was relieved to get to my room after the day was over and poured out my heavy heart to the Lord. I kept on having devotions in the classroom to the end of the second year. But my heart was heavy.

One Sunday, as Barbara and I sat in the Amish church service, the preacher was saying that there is misbehavior going on in our schools. He urged the parents to take charge of their children if they were involved with misbehavior. Barbara thought he was speaking about her school and I thought he was speaking about mine. I knew that my keeping the children in proper respect seemed out of hand at times. Some days I thought that if Jacob Miller would be removed from my school, it would be much easier.

On another day, two sisters came earlier than any of the rest and were talking with me. The older one said in German, “Erma, if I were you, I would give Jacob *schläg* (a spanking).”

When visiting with Greenwood girls on one occasion, one of them asked me, “Do you like teaching?” I said “Yes,” as I felt myself blush. Was I lying? I reasoned with myself that I like teaching but not the way it was going at times. I was processing what to do about next year. I was praying about it. If only I had college, it would go better, I thought.

Not coming back – This was the second year that our Conference was sponsoring a six-week Bible School at Berlin, Ohio. I had a strong desire to attend. I felt it would be so good for my Christian walk and I would be a better teacher with more knowledge of the Scriptures. In my second year of teaching, I decided to tell the school board that I would not return for the next year. My host family expressed disappointment. Word got around to others. Annie and Sylvia came to me sadly and said, “We heard you are not coming back.” I kept teaching the rest of the year and I felt my devotional period at the school was well received. But even with some things working out well, I had peace about not coming back.

I accepted an invitation from Mark Peachey to go to Turner’s Creek, Kentucky, with a team to hold evangelistic meetings. I looked forward to spending time on a mission field of our Conference immediately after my second year of teaching and felt confirmed that I was finding God’s will through this request.

Attendance at the Conservative Amish Mennonite Bible School (now Rosedale Bible College) at Berlin, Ohio, the following winter was a great blessing and a dream fulfilled. After spending a term in Berlin, David and I returned to Grantsville. We got married on March 28, 1954, had seven children, and spent 40 years in Conference ministry in Flint, Michigan and Rosedale, Ohio!

Back to that surprising letter – When I got the letter from Jacob’s wife, fifty plus years had passed since my debut in Dover, Delaware, teaching a schoolroom full of Amish children whom I came to love dearly.

I responded to the letter with my phone number. One Saturday at 5 p.m., Jacob called. He said, “Erma, I apologize for the way I acted at school in 1952. I didn’t know it, and you didn’t know it, but you planted a seed in my life. Life has changed, and a lot of water has gone under the bridge since those days.” He shared further that he had married and had many grandchildren. His first wife died and he remarried. He had been ordained as a minister and was serving in the Amish church. He mentioned their “singings,” and how they would sing in German for thirty minutes and then in English, and stated, “when we sing the songs you taught us in school, the tears run down my cheeks.”

I was touched by the conversation with Jacob. I felt that I had cast my bread upon the waters and it returned after many days. I thought back over those experiences in Dover and I began to wonder about the other students. How could I find out about them? I sent a letter to *The Budget*, a Sugar Creek, Ohio newspaper used by many Amish people.

Some of my former students responded with letters, phone calls, and visits. They had been wondering about my whereabouts throughout the decades and seemed glad to hear

from me. They remembered impressions and values they gleaned at Apple Grove School. It was so interesting to hear from them and to learn where they lived, about their families, and what they have been doing throughout the decades. Now they are mature, have lived adult lives for many years, and are seasoned seniors. Their testimonies of faith ring with sincere words of hope and humility. Some have gone on to their eternal reward. My heart responds with sympathy for those who have experienced losses.

My experience in the school room in Dover was a rich one on which I look back with pleasure. Yes, there were a few rough spots. When I heard that Jacob Miller wanted to talk with me and when he called to apologize, memories of his department surfaced. I remembered the feeling of half a century ago

that some of my efforts were not successful. But the call from Jacob and the calls, letters, and visits from other former students reminded me that we do not always know how effective our ministries are or aren't. I was reminded again of Ecclesiastes 11:1, "Cast thy bread upon the waters and after many days it shall return unto thee."

As I look back over my life from the perspective of an octogenarian, I can testify to the goodness of the Lord. When I sought him in my youth, he led me step by step into a life I could not have planned for myself. My desire to attend college and the barriers to it were real, but the Lord led in ways that brought fulfillment without a college degree. My vision for missionary service abroad did not materialize, but there were plenty of opportunities for gospel witness in the settings of my adult life.

I was privileged to date and marry a man who was not only my choice, but also God's choice, and the Lord gave us a wonderful family. As opportunities for ministry became more numerous than time permitted, I learned that not all requests from others are God's will for my life automatically and that the Lord, in His own time, directs our paths as specifically as needed. I am so glad that in my youth and throughout my lifetime, it was my purpose to put God's will ahead of my own and His leading over my desires. I did it so imperfectly, but I'm glad that I had and held that purpose. **BB**

Erma Miller lives in London, Ohio with her husband, David I. Miller. They attend Shiloh Mennonite Church and find that their 19 grandchildren and six great-grandchildren keep them busy.

Uncommon Sense



Putting Thoughts and Emotions on a Budget



Steve Swartz

Many families who spent their money freely before the recession have now reigned in their spending. Some families are also beginning to follow a budget for their finances. That's good because the allocation of dollars to categories helps make values visible. Financial experts suggest the following budgeting for after-tax income: 10% for giving, 10% for savings, 5% for debt (other than housing), 25% for housing, 15% for transportation, 5% for insurance, 20% for household/personal, 5% for entertainment, and 5% for professional services.

A recession is also a good time to budget thoughts and emotions. It is particularly when life gets stressful that unhelpful thoughts and emotions come to our awareness. And this is a good time to put our thoughts and emotions on a budget that properly reflect our values as a Christian. While no "thoughts and emotions experts" are available to recommend percentages, it is clear that God's Word has the final word on what thoughts and emotions we need to budget **in** or **out** to reflect our values as a Christian.

"And if we have food and covering, with these we will be content" (1 Tim. 6:8)

I'm budgeting in contentment.

I'm budgeting out covetousness.

"And what do you have that you did not receive? But if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?" (1 Corinthians 4:7)

I'm budgeting in gratefulness.

I'm budgeting out ingratitude.

"A joyful heart makes a cheerful face, but when the heart is sad, the spirit is broken." (Proverbs 15:13)

I'm budgeting in joyfulness.

I'm budgeting out self-pity.

"My soul, wait in silence for God only, for my hope is from Him." (Psalms 62:5)

I'm budgeting in meekness.

I'm budgeting out anger.

"He who sows sparingly shall also reap sparingly; and he who sows bountifully shall also reap bountifully." (2 Corinthians 9:6)

I'm budgeting in generosity.

I'm budgeting out stinginess.

"But we proved to be gentle among you, as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children." (1 Thess. 2:7)

I'm budgeting in gentleness.

I'm budgeting out harshness.

"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness." (2 Timothy 4:7,8)

I'm budgeting in determination.

I'm budgeting out faintheartedness.