

HERITAGE HORIZONS

NORTH AMERICAN BAPTIST HERITAGE COMMISSION

Celebrating a Rich Past ... Inspiring a Promising Future

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Balancing Act

Randy Tschetter



“Gosh, there is no way I could answer that. Except to say it depends.”

That is the response I received from an archivist at the American Baptist Historical Society when I asked for her advice about which or how many copies of a manuscript we should keep. She wrote, “It depends upon the historical significance of or sentiment attached to a particular document or artifact in relationship to the amount of storage space which is available within the archive.”

In recent weeks, Darlene Frueh and I have spent many hours reviewing and organizing some of the hundreds of files and thousands of documents that are housed at the North American Baptist Heritage Commission. Frequently we find ourselves involved in something of a balancing act – historical significance versus physical space. Receipts for purchase of pizza at a 1973 gathering at the International Office in Oakbrook Terrace, for example, probably serve no real historical value. An envelope containing dozens of unidentified black-and-white photos of an event that happened thirty years ago can easily be reduced to just one or two. Files containing NAB Conference and NAB Seminary promotional brochures from the 1960s and 1970s have been reduced in size while maintaining accurate historical documentation. At the same time, we have largely left intact files of correspondence in which seminary presidents invite guests to speak at chapel or make pastoral recommendations of senior students to various denominational churches.

Reviewing seminary and denominational files provides opportunities for some interesting reading and offers some valuable insights into some behind-the-scenes conversations and relationships:

- Letters of a typically soft-spoken seminary professor expressing some genuine “anger” over a ministerial situation in which he is involved.



A Tribute to Bee Westerman

Randy Tschetter

The familiar phrase “busy as a bee” certainly characterizes the life of Berneice “Bee” Westerman. For Bee, however, life was never just about being busy but always about ministry and service. When Bee died on May 21, 2019, at the age of 95, she left a legacy of a woman who lived her life as a faithful servant of God. At her memorial service, she was praised for allowing God to use her to significantly impact God’s Kingdom in Cameroon and in North America.

Bee liked to use words like “recycled” and “re-tired” to describe the last twenty-five years of her life. She suggested that when she concluded her career as a missionary she was simply recycled into a new career as an archivist for the North American Baptist Heritage Commission. She sometimes described this period of her life in automotive terms of “re-tirement” in which she simply put on four new tires and moved forward into her new calling.

Bee was first and foremost a teacher, beginning her career in a single-room schoolhouse in rural South Dakota. In 1949, she was appointed as a missionary-teacher to Cameroon by the North American Baptist Conference. During the next forty years, Bee supervised mission schools and served as a teacher of the children of missionaries. A high point in her life began in 1961 as she helped establish and was the first principal of Saker Baptist College, an all-

girls secondary school. Several former Saker students, known as Sakerettes, were present at Bee’s funeral service in Sioux Falls to honor the memory of one they affectionately call Ma Bee.

In recent months, I have been reviewing hundreds of files housed at the NAB Archives in Sioux Falls. Bee’s impact upon this organization is easy to detect in her correspondence with pastors and churches across the NAB as she requested and organized historical documents and wrote follow-up and thank-you letters. Her accomplishments cannot be duplicated, only built upon. Even when she completed her work with the Heritage Commission at the age of 90, she had plans to write her life story, a project she was unable to fully complete.

An early document in her file suggests that in her early years Bee had to overcome shyness and insecurity as she followed God’s call to missionary service. Over the years, however, she grew in self-confidence and in her ability to face and deal with new opportunities and challenges. As is often the case, God used the life of an ordinary, small-town girl like Bee to bless the lives of hundreds of people around the world and to make a positive impact for good and for His Kingdom. Rest in peace, Ma Bee Westerman.

- A pastor venting his “frustration” and seminary personnel responding over a matter of misunderstanding regarding a potential student.
- Evaluations of seminary seniors by denominational and seminary leaders indicating that the wife of a particular student has a tendency to be “rather outspoken” or that another “is not a good house-keeper.”
- Decisions about denominational programs and ministries often being made after somewhat heated conversations or various strongly held opinions were expressed.

This balancing act of historical significance and space also has an impact on the nature and amount of materials we can accept from churches and individuals. In many cases, church artifacts are more meaningful if they are displayed in the context of the local congregation. Submitting a written list or photos of documents and artifacts enables the Heritage Commission to determine those items that are most valuable to our mission.

Ultimately, we continue to do our best in the balancing act of managing the Archives. We have also found some added space on the shelves that allows us to move some interesting items from the storeroom to the display area of the Heritage Commission.



Ev Shepherd has recently joined the Heritage Commission’s volunteer staff. He taught French and German during his working career. Ev is our go-to guy when we have questions about articles or documents written in German. Recently, he has been translating some articles from German to English and assisting John Siewert by scanning issues of *Der Sendbote*, looking for references to NAB missionary work in Cameroon in the early 1900s.

John Siewert is one of the Heritage Commission’s longest-serving volunteers. John’s sister and brother-in-law, George and Alma Henderson, served as NAB missionaries in Cameroon from 1947 to 1967. Following a visit to Cameroon in 2001, John felt led to write a historical account of NAB missions in Cameroon. He hopes to complete work on his book sometime in 2020. John has also spent hundreds of hours in organizing, cataloguing, and digitizing the Cameroonian collection of books and other documents that are housed at the Heritage Commission.



Other recent volunteers have been Daphne Dunger, Darline Bill, Lenore Lang, and Marjorie Buseman. The efforts of all of the volunteers are greatly appreciated, and they have made valuable contributions to the work of the Heritage Commission. Thanks, volunteers!



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