



## Amish Mennonite Historian Leaves a Rich Legacy

— Lorraine Roth of Tavistock, Ontario —

by Ruth Steinman\*

Lorraine Roth,  
Feb. 25, 1930-  
Dec. 11, 2013

My first memories of Lorraine were as a young child at church when I would hear about the missionary woman, Lorraine Roth, from nearby Shakespeare. Later, I heard her name mentioned at family reunions, as she had helped with genealogy projects. I first personally became acquainted with Lorraine through my job at the library during the 1990s. Lorraine was a regular researcher at the Mennonite Archives of Ontario and our library, as she collected information and verified sources for her various genealogy projects and historical publications.

As she aged and no longer drove her car, Lorraine would call me in advance of her visits to the college to ask if I might be able to give her a ride home to her nearby apartment after work. That began our friendship which grew, as she eventually moved back to Tavistock, and I became a regular visitor with Lorraine.

I became a link to her research collection at Conrad Grebel's library and archives, with occasional phone calls from Lorraine at work and home to check for information, or to bring books for her to read and review. I enjoyed hearing Lorraine reminisce about her life, and I always hoped these stories would be written down somewhere, as she did not lead a typical life for Mennonite women of her time from the Tavistock area. Her educational level and travel experiences set her apart. Particularly in the last year, as she no longer had her work to occupy her time, she reminisced more about her early life in our conversations.

Lorraine became a member of Tavistock Mennonite Church in early 2008 and enjoyed attending services until it became too difficult due to her physical limitations. But she remained interested in the life of the congregation and appreciated receiving her church mail and visits

from church members and other friends, who enjoyed her quick smile and interesting and informative company very much.

Lorraine's interest in genealogical research began in the late 1940s when she created a Brenneman family tree on a window blind. She related this to me numerous times, and the blind is part of her archival collection. The first genealogy for which she collected information was *A Genealogical Study of the Nicolaus and Veronica (Zimmerman) Roth Family, 1834-1954*, when relatives from Indiana showed up at their house to obtain information for their branch of the family—Barbara (Roth) Zehr. Lorraine's grandfather had simply placed a letter requesting information into a drawer and it was forgotten. So the relatives tracked down the family and showed up at their house. This led to research for genealogies of her own family branches, and soon others were asking for assistance with their family histories.

Lorraine personally compiled 25 published genealogies and assisted with 15 or 20 more. She also published numerous articles in *Mennonite Family History* and *Ontario Mennonite History* over the years.

In 1972, she wrote a *Souvenir Booklet for the Sesquicentennial of the Amish Mennonites of Ontario*; she wrote *Willing Service: Stories of Ontario Mennonite Women* in 1992; and her book, *The Amish and Their Neighbours, the German Block, Wilmot Township, 1822-1860*, was published in 1998 and has been reprinted.

A total of 30 archival boxes contain her meticulous files of genealogical records of over 100 Amish Mennonite surnames, her biographical records of Ontario Mennonite women, research notes from *The Amish and Their Neighbours*, and personal records of her missionary time in Honduras and trips to Europe.

Lorraine's reputation as a stellar genealogist and historian has not gone unnoted. She was honored at an appreciation event in Wellesley in April 1993, attended by 200 guests. The Mennonite Historical Society of Canada

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*Author Ruth Steinman and Laureen Harder-Gissing enjoying Lorraine Roth's archival collection at the Milton Good Library, Conrad Grebel University College, Waterloo, Ontario. Ruth is in the forefront with Laureen, Archivist-Librarian, in the rear.*

in January 2010 named Lorraine as the recipient of its "Award of Excellence" for her lifelong contribution to the preservation of Canadian Mennonite history. Lorraine was a charter member of the Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario, and served on historical committees for the Mennonite church, binational, the former Western Ontario Mennonite Conference, and the former Mennonite Conference of Eastern Canada.

In October 2011, I had the privilege to be part of a committee to plan a Lorraine Roth Archives Reading Room Fundraising Dinner. At this event, which Lorraine was able to attend, we celebrated her role in documenting Amish and Mennonite history and began the \$75,000 fundraising initiative to construct the archives reading room at Conrad Grebel University College in her honor. To date over \$65,000 has been raised towards this project. Attendees were invited to share comments on small cards to be given to Lorraine following the event. In true Lorraine fashion, rather than simply enjoying reading the cards, she organized the cards and typed up a record of them.

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She used a computer in her later years, but used it more like a typewriter rather than as a research tool. On numerous occasions, I received phone calls from Lorraine wondering if I could drop by to fix a computer problem or to find a lost file. Fortunately, these problems were usually quickly corrected, however, her computer did die several weeks before her move to long-term care. She printed every document, so they are in her archival files. She was never connected to the internet, and had some fears about it. I always wished she could discover the multitude of online genealogical resources available today. There is no longer the need to manually search for census records, surveys, birth and death records as Lorraine did with great perseverance and attention to detail.

Last November, when Lorraine's health necessitated a move to long-term care at the Maples Home for Seniors, I remember well the full morning spent along with archivist Laureen Harder-Gissing, Lorraine's friend Helen Brenneman, and family members Howard, Shirley, and Wanda, as we packed up her entire collection of files and papers from her room in the retirement home to bring to the Mennonite Archives of Ontario and Milton Good Library.

We filled 21 boxes that morning, to add to several boxes of materials we had received years earlier. Although this collection has remained unprocessed to date, because it is so well organized, several researchers have already benefited from using it. I took pictures of the boxes in their new temporary home to show Lorraine, and assured her many times that her papers are safe and sound and will continue to be a wonderful resource for years to come. She remarkably seemed to be at peace with that, although I think she did feel somewhat lost for a while without her files. She continued to make notes and record editorial comments on articles and books. A couple of months ago I loaned her my copy of Conrad Grebel's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary history book, and, when she returned it to me, she had inserted several tiny slips of paper with paper clips, with personal comments in her very tiny handwriting, probably to conserve paper.

Lorraine was able to attend the ground-breaking ceremony for the building expansion project at Conrad Grebel University College in March 2012. At that time, Helen Brenneman and I brought Lorraine upstairs to the library to show her the area which will be renovated to become the Lorraine Roth Archives Reading Room. I was looking forward to bringing Lorraine back to see this when completed next summer, but that was not to be. However, researchers and genealogists will benefit from her contributions for many years to come. Thank you, Lorraine, for your dedication to researching the Amish and Mennonite story, for the gift of your collection to Conrad Grebel University College, and, for your friendship. I will miss you.