



Victoria Ave., Vineland

## **Bishop Samuel F. Coffman**

**When the war began, it was not clear how Mennonites would be affected. The hope of most Mennonites to continue to live quietly and resist enlistment was unsettled by the advent of conscription in 1917.**

**The Military Service Act brought in conscription in August. Following soon after, the Wartime Elections Act disenfranchised conscientious objectors. This was new legislative territory for both the government and Mennonites, and confusion about the implications of these Acts was the result.**

**Taken by surprise, Ontario Mennonite leaders moved quickly. A delegation was sent to Ottawa to clarify that Mennonites were excepted from the Military Service Act.**

**Bishop Coffman became the go-between for voluminous correspondence with government officials, Mennonite leaders, and Mennonites affected by conscription, laboriously typing the letters himself.**

## **S.F. Coffman's response to surveillance, 1917**

Today I was favored with a visit from a Government officer from Ottawa, who brought a report that I had been preaching sermons that were discouraging recruiting and production.

Some remarks that we had made when encouraging our people to be steadfast in their non-resistant faith were dragged from their setting and meaning and were sent to the authorities as a charge of unpatriotic sentiment.

Such is the condition of affairs today, and we will only have to live a life that disproves any such adverse criticisms....But above all things we shall endeavor to be steadfast in the faith of the Gospel...

- **S.F. Coffman to L.J. Burkholder,  
November 7 1917**

**Ella and Samuel Coffman  
with their children in  
Vineland, 1920s**

Born in the United States,  
Coffman was appointed  
bishop of the Ontario  
Mennonite Conference in  
1903.



Sir Percy Sherwood,  
Chief Commissioner of Police,  
Ottawa, Ont.

Sir:-

With reference to the report concerning the charge that I made the following statements, "What good are the soldiers. They produce nothing, they earn nothing, they don't earn the cloths they wear, they do nothing but destroy. If any of you are producing food to help win the war, don't do it; If you are producing food to feed the needy, alright, go on."

The purported statements were made on the 14th Ult. in connection with a sermon encouraging our people to continue steadfastly in the non-resistance principles of our faith. Those who were not in sympathy with those doctrines would not understand the meaning of the manner in which the true expression was made. "That soldiers are unproductive of anything as far as their support is concerned, hence in that respect soldiers are a burden but not a creative power in the world." Regarding the second part, my statements were that our people should not be engaged in the raising of food stuffs solely for war purposes, since it is not in the spirit of our doctrine to thus support war, but, that our people should continue to raise their produce for the good of the world in general." It was not in my purpose to speak against the Government, their soldiers or their methods. Our people understood me thus and know that I have never discouraged any of the work of the Government. There are no members of our congregation who were eligible for army service and hence no occasion to discourage recruiting or speak against soldiers as a class.

I am willing to acknowledge that the statements that were made could have been wrongly construed if taken out of their proper connection and away from the general tenor and spirit of the discourse. Otherwise they could not have been thus construed.

My congregation consists of about seventy members and among them there is but one young man in class I and he has made claim for exemption from service on the grounds of being a member of the Mennonite Church.

Respectfully,  
S. F. Coffman

S. F. Coffman to Sir Percy Sherwood,  
November 7, 1917