



# CONCHIES SPEAK

Ontario Mennonites in Alternative Service 1941-1946

## Part IV: Mennonite women speak



**Alternative Service workers and their wives at Montreal River, 1942.**

***Left to right: Mary and Henry Braun, Ted and Mary Harder, Helen and Jacob Andres***

# Mennonite Women and Conscientious Objection

“It was not women who had to think about being conscientious objectors to war. My father did not quiz prospective daughters-in-law on their attitudes to pacifism.”

- Magdalene Redekop, “Through the Mennonite Looking Glass”

In the Second World War, Mennonite women played supportive roles to nonresistant men but also experienced a wartime shift in gender roles.

Mothers supported their sons with letters and care packages. Wives often had to find work, some earning more than their CO husbands. Some wives traveled to British Columbia to be nearer to their husbands in the camps. Rural women shouldered more of the burden of farm work. As they did in the First World War, Mennonite women produced material aid for the relief of war suffering.

The war also had a visible effect on Mennonite educational institutions, where the student ratio became heavily female. Also highly visible in the Mennonite community were nurses and others who volunteered for service in Europe in war and post-war relief efforts.

- with text from *Mennonite Women in Canada: A History* by Marlene Epp





*Erma Cressman*



# Erma Dedels Cressman

**Born** to Norman and Catharine Dedels

**Married to** Fred Cressman

**Worked** at B.F. Goodrich during the war  
making aviation boots

## **Church life:**

Member of Stirling Avenue Mennonite Church

## **Alternative Service:**

Wife of Alternative Service worker  
Fred Cressman who served in British Columbia  
from 1942-1943



### **An interesting fact :**

Fred and Erma Cressman gave a talk on their wartime experiences at Stirling Avenue Mennonite Church in 1988. The accompanying story is edited from Erma's own words.



### **The photograph :**

Fred and Erma Cressman in 1993

**“There was a lot of criticism in the plant. I didn’t say much, only when I had to defend myself. Some said we bought our way. Others said, if we couldn’t live on 50 cents a day then why didn’t my husband join the services like other men?”**

When Fred’s call came, what would we do? Many hard questions had to be answered in the next six months – *why, when, where*. There was really never any question but that Fred would register as a C.O.

I can remember with a lot of mixed emotion being at the Kitchener station with 3,000 other people, watching the train pull out, the boys leaning out of the windows as people on the platform sang “God be with you till we meet again.” I still have problems with that hymn.

I admit, at that time, I was bitter. How could some boys stay at home on the farm while others had to go? It was only a couple of days before our first anniversary when they left.

I had to go to work. I couldn’t live on [Fred’s wages of] 50 cents a day, so I got a job at B.F. Goodrich where I worked on aviation boots. This was questioned by some Mennonites. How could I work on war material when my husband was a C.O.? I had no other support and no Mennonite offered me an alternate job. I gave up our apartment and lived in one room. It was all I could afford. Our son David was born while Fred was away but God saw me safely through that experience.

As I look back and think of what others suffered, I am at peace. No lives were taken and hopefully our younger generation will find a still better way to bring peace to a war torn world.



## Will Ye Heed The Call?

Edna Ramseyer, Bluffton College

Have you ever wished that you could prove your convictions on peace and war as your boy friend, husband, brother, or son has? Have you ever wondered if there are places for Mennonite girls or women to serve as our boys are serving at present?

Or haven't you wondered at all? Have you just considered yourself lucky that you haven't had to? Have you just crossed your fingers, hoping that women would not be drafted; and if so, then you would decide what stand you would take?

Girls and women of the Mennonite church groups! Our Christian responsibility to our God, the world, the church, our boys in Civilian Public Service is tremendous. The challenge is before us; the projects await us; the question is, do we as girls and women want to serve? Are we willing to take time out to do the little things that count so much?

**Opening paragraphs of an article  
addressed to Mennonite women by  
Edna Ramseyer on the front page of  
*Missionary News and Notes*,  
November, 1943**

**“Civilian Public Service” was the  
American equivalent of Alternative Service**



**Mennonite women were discouraged from “war work” projects, and encouraged to provide relief to suffering civilians.**

**Mennonite women continued material aid after the war. Here, Alice Snyder labels Christmas bundles for a Mennonite Central Committee shipment in 1954.**



*The Star Weekly, Toronto, August 14, 1943*

## GIRLS MAN THE FARM FRONT



**MANY A PRETTY HAND** helps Canada reach vital food production goals. Here Anna and Ella Wideman assist their brother, Lorne, in operating the potato-planting machine on their farm near Markham, Ont. Anna alone has plowed 120 acres.

**Before this photo was taken in 1943, Lorne Wideman was in Alternative Service from 1941-1942**



**The 1944 class of the Ontario Mennonite Bible School in Kitchener was made up predominantly of young women**





## *Edna Hunsperger Bowman*

# Edna Hunsperger Bowman

**Born** 1912 to Lydia Ann and Dilman Hunsperger,  
raised on a farm near Preston

## **Work & education:**

Some high school, then nurse's training in Kitchener  
Nursing in Toronto during polio epidemic,  
then private duty nursing

**Church life:** Member of Wanner Mennonite Church

## **Alternative Service:**

Evacuation homes in the English countryside, and at the  
Mennonite Central Committee centre in London, 1942-1946



### **An interesting fact :**

Edna Hunsperger and Elfrieda Klassen were the first nurses sent to England by Mennonite Central Committee during the Second World War. Elfrieda would meet and marry fellow MCC worker Peter Dyck in England during the war. Edna married Henry Bowman in Ontario in 1957.



### **The photograph :**

V.E. ("Victory in Europe") Day celebrations at the Mennonite Centre in London on May 8, 1945. The children were residents of a convalescent home run by Mennonite Central Committee.



**“Don’t necessarily get carried away with what everybody else is doing, but ask, ‘Is this what I, as a Christian, should be doing?’”**

On the morning of September 1, 1939, Edna Hunsperger, coming off a night duty shift, heard the radio announcement: “Canada is at war.”

Edna felt much pressure to enlist. She wanted to help people, but she didn’t want to join the military. She recalls, “I certainly didn’t feel comfortable joining the forces, [I’d] be a part of the war machine . . . Other nurses were signing up and I was thinking to myself that I would have some mud thrown at me for not doing anything because I knew they would not understand the conscientious objector point of view.”

Edna was soon invited to take a Mennonite Central Committee assignment as a nurse in England. When she spoke of her plans, people responded with fears for her safety. “They thought it was very dangerous. They read in the paper that these bombs were flying all over and it was very dangerous . . . I guess they respected me too, though.”