

Point of View

by Ralph Pohlman



Three years ago, I went back to my home town, Melville, Sask., for the millennium homecoming.

At this kind of gathering, one hears glowing references to famous people who grew up there. This tends to give proof of what a wholesome and healthy atmosphere the town provided. For Melville, that meant hockey players like Eddie Shore or Sid Abel and the former great hitter for the Houston Astros, Terry Puhl, who even showed up for the reunion.

Not surprisingly, they

seldom mention the folk they'd just as soon forget and who might lend a much different image to the town. That's probably true of every place. So, just to round out the picture, Melville was once home to Verne Sankey.

What? You've never heard of Verne Sankey? Why, in the '30s Verne Sankey was declared Public Enemy No. 1 by the FBI in the United States. His picture was in every newspaper in Canada and the U.S., especially when he was captured on Feb. 1,

Small Town Boy Makes Bad

1934 while having a shave in a Chicago barber shop.

Melville was a division point on the old Grand Trunk Railway, which later became part of Canadian National, and has always been known as a "railroad town." As a young guy, around 1911, Sankey signed on as a watchman in the Grand Trunk yards and later became a fireman and then an engineer. His career as a locomotive engineer ended in 1931 when he was granted a

leave of absence by the CNR and never returned.

But it was those years as an engineer that formed the vehicle for his secret life. And, in the spacious cab of that locomotive, the basis of a lasting comradeship blossomed between Sankey and Gordon Alcorn, another local boy, who was Sankey's fireman.

Those were still almost pioneer days in Western Canada and Prohibition was in force south of the border. Sankey smuggled booze into the U.S., hiding it in freight cars. He was a charming rascal, still remembered by some of the oldtimers as wearing a raccoon coat with diamonds on his fingers and a smile on his face. Life was a big adventure.

Unfortunately, he was also a gambler. Luck smiled on him for a while but money just flowed through his hands, either through cards and dice or \$10 tips to bellboys and

chambermaids. Then bank robberies started to occur in places like Regina and Winnipeg. By coincidence, Sankey just happened to have driven a train into town on those days.

A famous story tells how his train once took a Melville hockey team to play in Regina. While there, a bank was robbed and Sankey put the money in his trainman's club bag and tossed it in with the team's equipment. "Here," he said, "take this home for me and I'll pick it up later." Which he did.

By this time there were suspicions, but Sankey was never charged with the robbery. They couldn't find the money. After he left Melville in 1931, with his wife, Fern, and his two kids, he purchased a ranch in South Dakota. He boasted of having turkeys and 75 splendid purebred beef cattle.

But his ranch apparently became the centre of his more ambitious money-raising activities. In June,

1932, Haskell Bohn, the 22-year-old son of a St. Paul manufacturer, was kidnapped and held several days until the ransom was paid.

Now this was getting dangerous. Kidnapping had become a federal offence after the Lindbergh baby kidnapping and could mean life imprisonment. On Feb. 13, 1933, Sankey and his boys seized Charles Boettcher II, a wealthy Denver businessman, who was held blindfolded at the ranch until they collected the ransom.

All this stimulated a huge manhunt that lasted about a year and cost a fortune. Sankey was arrested while having a shave and haircut in a Chicago barbershop. The next day Alcorn was arrested in his bed in a Chicago house. Both confessed.

Alcorn was sentenced to life in Leavenworth, but Sankey had sworn he wouldn't do time. On Feb. 8, just a week after he was captured, Sankey stuffed a handkerchief down his throat, apparently to prevent noise, attached his necktie to a projection on the ceiling of his cell, and jumped from his cot. They couldn't revive him.

Later, back at the ranch, evidence was found of a scheme to kidnap sports celebrities. Among those being considered were Jack Dempsey and Babe Ruth.

And that is the story of Verne Sankey, small town Saskatchewan boy. It would make a great movie. A little Butch Cassidy.

FAITH & LIFE

A MENNONITE PERSPECTIVE

by Arlene Reesor



Sunday Morning Plus...

Our church's Community Relations and Outreach Team was discussing upcoming Stouffville This Month columns at our last meeting. We looked back at past topics - science and religion, malaria in Africa, Mennonites' position on war and non-violence, the politics of food, etc., and concluded that anyone reading these columns would get the impression that folks at Community Mennonite Church are a very serious bunch. We decided it was time to provide another aspect of our church life - the lighter, social, community side.

Church life for us at Community Mennonite can mean much more than a two hours on Sunday morning, if one chooses to be involved. Following are some events and activities that took place at our church over the past few years.

Small groups (biweekly/monthly) - organized each year for the purpose of discussion, study or purely social activities.

Annual Golf tournament - occurs each August for those 14 years old and up, now co-ed. Recently been extended to an annual winter golf long weekend in South Carolina!

BBQ and corn roast in autumn and annual church picnic in June.

Family hikes and family movie night.

"Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?" - guest and host families were identified, with the hosts not knowing whom to expect for dinner.

African dinner - several participants in our church have lived and worked in Africa, and with their expertise we enjoyed an authentic African feast.

Soup lunch, pancake lunch - organized and served by our teenagers, as fundraisers for their activities.

Square dances and an evening of ballroom dancing, including a lesson.

Numerous after-church potlucks.

Public lectures on the Middle East

Ongoing dialogue with our Moslem neighbours.

The Cutting Edge public discussion group.

Many volunteer opportunities that space doesn't permit me to elaborate on.

Our teenagers and pre-teens have their own organized activities several times a month, in addition to those events above. Our Mennonite Youth Fellowship (MYF) is very active, and is comprised of high school-aged kids from four local Mennonite churches, with a youth pastor. They have had a very busy past year, with many fund-raising events and projects, earning money to travel to a big Mennonite youth conference in Atlanta. In addition, four teenagers from our church travelled to Zimbabwe, Africa this summer for an international Mennonite conference.

While Mennonites take their Christian faith seriously, fellowship and enjoyment are also an important part of our church. Whether you live alone or are part of a family, you will find something to interest and engage you. So, if you are looking for a church and want to meet new people and make new connections, come to Community Mennonite. Expect a warm welcome!!!

Feedback? We'd love to hear your comments. Please contact us at:

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