GREAT RELIGIOUS REVIVAL WHICH OCCURED IN THE OLEY VALLEY 175 YEARS AGO

The Oley Valley is noted for its beauty and productiveness. Nature has indeed been lavish in bestowing upon it a landscape of unusual charm and fertility of soil that has made its tillers wealthy beyond any other section of eastern Pennsylvania. It was the first settled part of Berks county. Almost every nationality of western Europe was represented among its first settlers, and also, as one would naturally infer, almost every shade of Protestantism. Among them were the Reformed from Switzerland and the Palatinate, Lutherans from Germany and Sweden, Huguenots from France, Quakers from England, besides Baptists, Dunkards, Mennonites, New Borns, Separatists and a few Catholics. During the first half of the eighteenth century, the New Born, who were most zealous in the preaching of their peculiar tenets, were in the ascendency.

In 1741, 175 years ago, there occurred a religious revival in Oley which drew away many of the adherents of the New Born, checked their ardor and turned the trend to a more evangelical form of Christianity as represented by the older Protestant churches.

HENRY ANTES COMES TO OLEY.

In 1736 the pious Reformed layman, Henry Antes, of Frederick, Montgomery county, who with others, in 1725, had induced John Philip Boehm to assume the office of a minister among the Reformed settlers in Skippack, Falckner Swamp and elsewhere, and who later united with the Moravians, became their most influential layman, having charge of the civil affairs of the church under the title of senior civilis for the Moravian Church in America, came to Oley and conducted worship in private houses. He was not gifted in speaking, but possessed what is far better,

rugged honesty, sincere piety and, above all, a devotional spirit. He was attacked by the bold and contentious followers of Mathias Bauman, the founder of New Born. The following year Bishop Spangenberg, who was staying for a time with his old Schwenkfeldian friend, Christopher Wiegner, at Skippack, where the learned professor of theology took many practical lessons in agriculture, came to Oley. In a letter to his friend, Isaac Lelong, the bishop writes: "My outward occupation is at present farm work, but this is as much blessed to my soul as formerly studying and writing." The bishop first preached in the house of Jonathan Herbein and then in the house of Abraham Bertolett. The sermon at the latter place was based on John 1:7-9. In it he showed the fallacy in the unevangelical doctrines of the New Born, which, according to a contemporary diarist, marked the decline of their influence.

WHITFIELD VISITS ANTES.

When the celebrated English revivalist, George Whitfield, came to Pennsylvania he visited Antes and preached in his house April 23, 1740, to a large concourse of people. He was accompanied by Bishop Bohler, a Moravian, who preached in German. Mr. Seward, who accompanied Whitfield, recorded in his journal concerning this meeting: "They were Germans, where we dined and supped, and they prayed and sang in German, as we did in English, before and after eating." Here Whitfield learned of the destitute religious condition of the German settlers in the interior of the colony and especially in Oley. He wrote at once to his friend, Count Zinzendorf, and urged that he send missionaries to Pennsylvania and in particular to Oley.

PREACHES IN HOUSES AND BARNS.

A suitable person was found in the eloquent shoemaker, Andrew Eschenbach, of Naumburg, who, a few years previous, had joined the Moravians at Herrnhut and who had distinguished himself among the brethren by his humble and exemplary walk and conversation. He reached the colony in October, 1740, and was introduced to the awakened in Oley by their leader, Henry

Antes. He first stayed with the French Huguenot, Jean Bertolett, but afterwards with the family of John Leinbach, who was a native of Langen Selbot, where he was born in 1674, and where he had served for a number of years as an organist in the Reformed Church, of which he and his family were members, and whence he, in 1723, came to Oley. He immediately began preaching in houses and barns and also visited and preached the Gospel at Germantown, in Skippack, Fredericktown, Conestoga, Tulpehocken, Heidelberg and Mill Creek, opening up the way for Moravian mission stations in most of these places. Eschenbach deserves a more honored place among the missionaries of the colonial period than has heretofore been accorded him.

GREAT AWAKENING OCCURS.

At first his preaching made hardly any impression upon the residents in Oley, but the following year, 1741, a great awakening took place. In the Oley Church record we find the following striking entry:

"In the year 1741 the until now smouldering ashes broke fully forth and began to burn mightily. Eschenbach preached during the year with power and conviction. The entire township was in a state of excitement. One saw the people in crowds on their way to hear the Gospel. Besides a large number of married people and young maidens one counted 70 single young men, in whose hearts the grace of the Holy Spirit was working with power."

Surely if 70 single young men were reached the whole region must have been stirred from center to the outlying and more remote places. If measured by the percentage of the people reached during this revival, Eschenbach as an evangelist far outclasses Moody, Billy Sunday or any of the so-called modern revivalists.

The Huguenot Redemptioner Francis Clewell was one of the young men who came under the influence of Eschenbach at one of these meetings. Francis Clewell, in his autobiography, describes one of these meetings. The story of his life is of unusual interest and I will quote rather at length:

GRANDPARENTS WERE HUGUENOTS.

"I was born on September 24, 1720, in Auerbach, Baden-Durlach. My grandparents were French Protestants (Huguenots), who fled from Dauphine, France, with their children, leaving all their possessions behind. It was quick flight or sure death for them. They became members of the Reformed Church at Auerbach, where I was born and baptized, and in my 15th year, after careful instruction in Holy Writ and the doctrine of the Reformed Church, was baptized and admitted to the holy communion. In my 10th year of age I had the misfortune of losing my father, Francis Clavell, by death, who in the full blessed assurance of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, passed from time to eternity.

"After a lapse of one year my mother married again, John G. Fallens (Feller), who was born in Switzerland, but owing to the French wars, which brought ruin and desolation, they emigrated to North America, arriving in Philadelphia in the fall of 1737.

"On our arrival my dear mother handed me over to my future master, and she begged him earnestly to see to it that I attend church regularly, as well as attend to my private devotions, and admonished me to continue in the fear of the Lord.

SERVES MASTER FIVE YEARS.

"In the home of my new master, in the vicinity of Oley, Pa., during the five years of my service, I fared well, but there was little opportunity to attend religious services because there was no church near. On one occasion I passed a house where there was a large gathering, so that many had to stand on the outside. I thought it was a public sale, and tied my horse and went in. I inferred it was a Catholic seminary, but was informed they were the 'Herrnhuter,' Moravians, who a short time ago came to this country and preached a new doctrine. Upon further investigation I found the new doctrine the same which my sainted father held fast and in which he instructed me. The teaching of these truths engraved themselves upon my never-dying soul, and through grace and mercy sprang up in due time and bore fruit. Amen!"

CONGREGATION FORMED IN 1741.

Eschenbach had late in 1741 attempted to gather the fruits of his work into a congregation, which was to a union congregation, or rather a congregation in the spirit in which none was to surrender the peculiar tenets of their faith, but all unite in the common work of the Master. Those who entered into this scheme were: Frantz Ritter, Rude Hoe (Hoch), Jean Bertolett and wife, John Heinrich Newkierch and wife, John Leinbach, Sr., and wife, Henri Leinbach and wife, John Leinbach, Jr., and wife, Frederick Leinbach and wife, Jacob Buerstler and wife, Stephen Schoemaker and wife, Mr. Kintzy, Jacob Vetter and Michael Vetter, John de Turck, Abraham Levan, —— Kelcher and wife, Casper Nein and wife, Jonathan Herpein (Herbein) and wife, Samuel Hoch, Abraham Bartholet, John Leischer, Peter Bertolett's son, Ludwig Huebner, Abraham Hess, Matthias Hoffman, Joseph Schebosh, Martin Leick, Samuel Man, G. Jungmann, John Jacob Schneider, Peter Schneider, Catharine Cogin, Catharine Opin, Elizabeth Schneiderin.

TWO CONSECRATED YOUNG WOMEN ARRIVE.

Two young women, Anna Nitchmann, a sister to Bishop Nitchmann, and Johanna Sophia Molther, joined Eschenbach in Oley in the spring of 1741. They were the first of a large number of consecrated young women who came across the ocean to do missionary work. They visited the families of all denominations and sects, and prepared the way for the missionary pastors to follow. Especially did they win the affections of the people by their meetings with the children. Later the itinerant missionary, Leonard Schnell, who made a journey on foot to Georgia, preached in Oley, which was one of his stations, and finding the people unresponsive requested the authorities at Bethlehem to be relieved of preaching in Oley. He suggested to be spared from preaching where the people did not care for his preaching, so that he could preach oftener where the people heard the Gospel gladly. But he suggested that the meetings with the children be continued, since they preach more to the hearts of the people than his own discourses.

WORK AMONG CHILDREN IS BEING BLESSED.

The records at Bethlehem contain the following entry relative to Oley, March 17, 1746: "In Oley, Brother Mischler as arbiter and John Leinbach as overseer, with the consent of all persons interested in it. The work is progressing with evident blessing among the children."

At almost all of the Moravian mission stations in the colony was the way prepared by devoted young women who met with the children at the homes of the settlers and conducted meetings for them.

HOW BETHLEHEM WAS NAMED.

When in December, 1741, Count Zinzendorf arrived at Philadelphia, Eschenbach and his two assistants rushed to meet him, and reported concerning the wonderful work of the Spirit in Oley. From Philadelphia the count went to the settlement in the Forks on the Lehigh, where he arrived the day before Christmas, and which he named Bethlehem. John Martin Mack tells in a diary how Christmas was celebrated in the newly erected small log building:

"The place having as yet no name, it so happened, that on Christmas eve we called to mind the birth of our Saviour; and as there was a then partition wall between our dwelling room and the cow and horse stable, the 'ordinary' in the tenth hour of the night went over to the stable and commenced to sing with great fervency of spirit:

Not Jerusalem, lowly Bethlehem,
'T was that gave us Christ to save us.
Not Jerusalem, favored Bethlehem,
Honored is that name.
Thence came Jesus to release us,
Favored Bethlehem.

"And thus on Christmas eve, 1741, this new settlement received the name of Bethlehem."

ZINZENDORF PREACHES IN OLEY.

From Bethlehem Zinzendorf, his daughter and several others set out to Oley to witness the Spirit's work. On the second day of Christmas he preached to the people of Oley in the house of

Jean Bertolett. This was the counts first sermon in the new world. He was enthusiastic about the work in Oley and called the third synod of the congregation of God in the spirit to meet at Oley. This synod met in John DeTurck's house on February 21-23. It was at this synod that three Indian converts were baptized. They were called Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, because the Moravians shared in the then prevailing opinion that the Indians were descendants of the lost tribes of Israel. These converts were to become the patriarchs of the restored church of Israel. The third of them, Jacob, is said to be the hero in Cooper's interesting story, "The Last of the Mohicans."

COUNT AGAIN VISITS OLEY.

Zinzendorf again passed through Oley on his famous visit to the Indians at Shamokin in the fall of 1742. He expressed himself on several occasions that Oley would soon become a more important center than even Bethlehem. During his entire stay in Pennsylvania he paid special attention to the affairs of Oley. The part of his narrative of his journey through Oley is of local interest and is therefore quoted in full: "Friday, September 21, 1742, we met in conference at Bethlehem, in the course of which Brother Anton (Seyffert) installed (John Michael) Huber into the office of vice elder. We concluded Benigna (his daughter) had better not accompany us, as the journey was likely to be fatiguing and dangerous. After having taken affectionate leave of her, of Anton and of Rosina (Nitschmann) we set out and took the road Tulpehocken, keeping between Long Swamp and the Oley hills. We rode on until late at night. Before we reached our place of destination it grew as dark as pitch and riding became very difficult. I (Zinzendorf) was struck on the cheek and on the left eye by the limb of a tree and several of the sisters fell from their horses. No one, however, was seriously injured. At last we entered the borders of Oley and reached Brother (Jacob) Buerstler's house. The family were in bed and asleep, whereupon we awakened them by singing:

Heer Zebaoth!
Du wahrer Gott der Kreatur,
Gott, Schoepfer der Natur!
Gott, der die ganze Welt erhaelt
Und was verdarb
Mit Blut erwarb
Und heiliget—
Sey von uns angebet!

So wahr Du lebst,
Und dich erhebst auf Cherubim,
Und blendest die Seraphim
Under der Jehova bist und Christ;
So bleibst dein Blut
Das hoechste Gut
Der Suenderschaar—
Du bist uns alles gar!

"Whereupon they recognized their visitors and gave us a hearty reception.

"September 22. Came as far as Henry Leinbach's (who accompanied him on the journey among the Indians as far as Olstonwakin). Here we laid over, as I was expecting the elders; and as it was Saturday, I retired to my private apartment to attend to correspondence and to official business, although I was indisposed, as I had been since leaving Bethlehem. We fitted Sister Johanna Sophia Molther out for Europe, confirmed John Christopher Pyrlaeus, appointed to Philadelphia, and Gottlob Buettner, to Shecomeco. I had a long and edifying conversation with Henry Antes, who had come especially to see me about our work in general.

MEETS CONRAD WEISER.

"September 23. Antes preached with unction. After service we set out for Tulpehocken. On the way we concluded that Peter Bohler should accompany us. The Indian Joshua resolved to go with us also. As we were riding along we met Conrad Weiser, accompanied by an English justice of the peace and an Anabaptist preacher. The latter plied me with curious questions, which I declined answering. I came to the conclusion that the Baptists are the inquisitors of Christianity. Conrad pointed out a remarkable spring (The Robesonia Spring), the largest in this section of the country, covering an acre of ground, and 15 feet deep. It drives a mill at its very outlet.

HAS CONTEST WITH SATAN.

"In Tulpehocken I had a slight contest with Satan about the sacraments. A fierce fight was imminent, but a few hours removed the occasion of offense. I changed my plan in reference to John Philip Meurer and felt dispirited. His hearers presume to rank him equal with, and even superior to Buettner and Eschenbach. I conferred on him temporary powers as a minister of the Gospel, etc, etc."

CONSISTORY NAMED BY LOT.

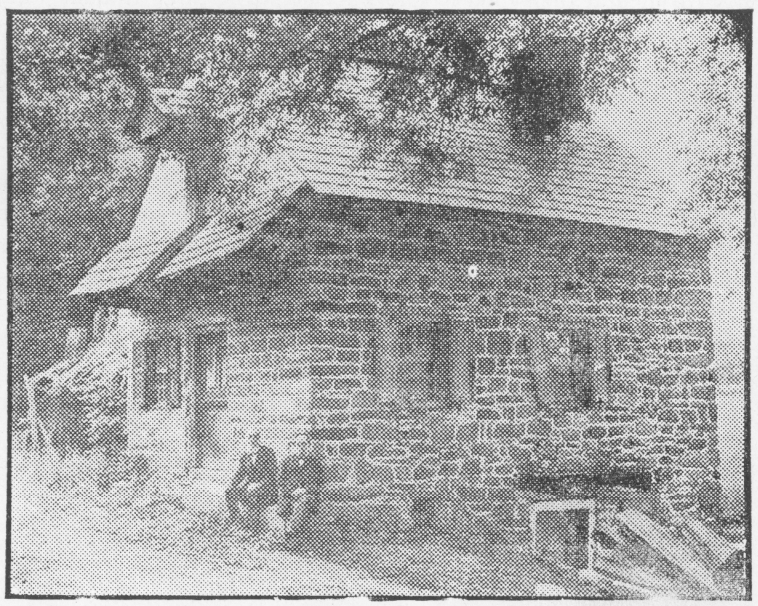
When at the synod in Oley, at which the three Indians were baptized, Zinzendorf attempted to organize their followers into a congregation, discord immediately arose. Zinzendorf, contrary to the wishes of many, desired to organize a formal congregation, and by the arbitrary use of the lot set about selecting a consistory. Jonathan Herbein, Frantz Ritter, Jacob Vetter and Samuel Hoch were proposed for elders. The lot falling upon the two former, they were declared elected. Jonathan Herbein protested, deeming himself unworthy and incapable for eldership. However, later Eschenbach suggested that Father (Jean) Bertolett be chosen, because he was an old and venerable man, and suggested that he and Father John Leinbach should become his co-laborers. The former declined, stating that his wife had died recently and that he, therefore, desired to remain at home in solitude.

Frantz Ritter and Jonathan Herbein, having finally accepted eldership, attended one of the several conferences held at Germantown in the spring of 1742. Here they fell out with Zinzendorf. Herbein wrote a long letter in answer to a number of questions which the latter had requested of him.

LETTER IS INTERESTING.

This letter is of unusual interest to the local historians and incidentally reveals both the strength and weakness of the Moravian movement. It must also be remembered that the letter is controversial and therefore partial and polemic. The letter shows than Zinzendorf, rather than Eschenbach, as has been stated by earlier writers, was the cause of the confusion which finally disrupted the Oley congregation. The letter follows:

"Dear Friend and Brother: With this opportunity I desire to comply with your request to present the course of events in writing faithfully and truly as follows. When conditions were as they are well known to you, Eschenbach came to us and spoke of beautiful institutions, including the education of the children and the preaching of the Gospel according to the pure custom of the Apostles, i. e., without any sectarianism, freely and without charge. And since there was nothing objectious in these representations we consented. He, however, demanded a call from us which was granted and signed by some.



John Deturck Homestead.

DISPUTE ARISES OVER BUILDING OF MEETING HOUSE.

"But when the count (Zinzendorf) came there was at once talk of a congregation; he wanted at once to make elders and also helpers and servants, which was done. Then he gave directions how a meeting house should be built, about which a quarrel

arose. One party wanted it simple, the other wanted it grand and stately; which as of old, at Babel, caused a confusion for which I unfortunately had to bear the blame. Because it was I who had made the proposition for a plain building and most of the people sided with me.

"Upon which the count (Zinzendorf) told me 'I should recognize that I had sinned against the Saviour in this case.' But my conscience did not accuse me, because it was evident to me that there was more of a desire for external show, in this matter, before hearts were inwardly converted or renewed.

"This was not without a special revelation of God. For meanwhile the adherents of the count claimed that the Saviour had assured them that there should be a congregation in Oley. When, by means of the lot, the plans had been made, they demanded of us that we should hold conferences three times a week, in order to reveal our thoughts to one another, to act unitedly and to consider how best souls could be won and brought in, for which we were thought to have sufficient ability. Regarding this I got into a dispute and I said that I could not consent to it. For it seemed to me too simple and trivial through an easily controlled lot to secure all the necessary ability to convert souls.

MORE DIFFICULTIES ARISE.

"The count represented to us that such mistrust was only in the beginning. He acted very friendly, came to us, embraced and kissed us and said: 'I must love my brethren.' Through this means he desired to set everything right. But there were more difficulties to be met. They thought by their cunning and love, together with flattery, they might cast their ropes around our necks. They wanted to ordain us by the laying on of hands in order to better convey to us their magical powers, since we were expected to partake with them of the Holy Supper. This I declined and told them I would not come. Eschenbach said that I was such a suspicious brother that I should tell him what was the matter with me.

"I answered: 'You promised us that we should neither be dependent on Herrnhut or the Moravian brethren, but should be a congregation of Christ. Why then to be ordained by men?

Rather we should implore and await from the Saviour, that He give us wisdom and ability.' And thus it remained until the next conference, where, when for two days, nothing but controversial matters regarding Schoenfeld and other matters were brought forward.

"Frantz Ritter finally asked what the word to forebear meant, that they should interpret it to him. The sly count, because he knew what questions were likely to follow, asked, 'Who is it that speaks?' The answer came, 'Frantz Ritter.' Whereupon the ardent count broke forth in a storm: 'You men from Oley, you do not belong to the congregation and have nothing to do with our conference.'

MR. RITTER SPEAKS HIS MIND.

"Then Frantz Ritter arose and spoke his mind and putting his hand on the door said, 'Then continue in your self-righteousness,' and left. On account of this the fire burned more vehemently until finally he (Zinzendorf) began: 'Yea, men of Oley, are hypocrites and liars, one should have debarred you from the first conference, but you ran after me, made apologies and kissed me.' At which I arose and said, 'This is an apparent untruth, for he came to us and kissed us and now impeaches us. We are not liars but truth-loving souls.' However, since no arguments were credited and Ludwig (Zinzendorf) spoke only out of vehemence, I said, 'Here is only strife and it does not depend thereon that one belongs to a large congregation, for the Saviour says that 'Where two or three are gathered together in His name there will He be in the midst of them,' opened the door and went away wishing them much good.

"Later when the count regained himself (von seinem Feuer wieder ab kam) he sent several men after me to win me back, declaring that he had no reference to me, because he thought that his coarse actions might cause a division. This they tried to accomplish with flattery and lies. Thus the matter stood until the last visit (of the count) through which he desired to flatter us. It was then that he sent to me one of his merciful brethren with the request that I should send him the account of the congregational house. I answered him that I was not inclined to do

so. Then he advised me to take this pretext and free myself of the whole matter. I replied that I would not accept it from him. Then he told me that Brother Ludwig said I should appropriate the house to myself. To this I replied, 'That is more than I can do, for it is not located on any of my lands.' For he had in mind the erection of another house if this one was out of the way. He repeated his first request, that I should give him an account. To which I replied, I myself will render my account to those from whom I have received money and need no assistance from any count.' After this he left and carried everything to his Lord, who seated himself upon his fiery judgment seat and threatened me with death and the devil unless I, kneeling, would ask his pardon.

"Then, at the time when they (in my absence) had me upon the stand, and, without doubt, passed all kinds of judgments upon me, it seemed to me as if I had to wrestle with spirits within me, which I without any hesitation courageously met, which, however, disturbed my peace and grieved my heart. Then, through grace, the thought came to me that I should free my conscience from all disturbances of such impish spirits by sinking myself in the fountain head of Jesus my Lord. Immediately after this thought had come to me and I had closed my eyes, in the twinkling of an eye all evil disturbances and uneasiness from within disappeared, and there came upon me a quietness, a peace, a sweetness of content the like of which I had never before in my life experienced. So it is likely that they unitel their magical powers against me, but these, by the power of Jesus, were dispersed like the dust by a strong wind."

Darum sey auch dem Lamm,
Dem Held aus Davids Stamm.
Dieweils durch ihm gelungen,
So sey ihm auch gesungen.
Lob, Preis und Dank und Ehr
Von Mensch und Engel Heer.
Amen, Hallelujah!

"So much for your information. Again my hearty greetings to you and the grace of our Lord Jesus. I remain your friend in the bonds of love."

J. JONATHAN HERBEIN.

FAILS TO WIN BACK FORMER FOLLOWERS.

In the diary of Zinzendorf, quoted above, Zinzendorf states that on September 22, 1742, he was "expecting the elders" of the Oley congregation to come and visit him at Henry Leinbach's. They, however, refused to come. He himself did not preach, but Antes, who had come to confer with him and whom the Oley people heard gladly, preached. Zinzendorf, however, shortly before his departure from the colony, late in 1742, preached once more in Oley.

It became more and more apparent that neither Eschenbach nor Zinzendorf could win back the embittered minds in Oley. Towards the close of the year (1742) Eschenbach was recalled from Oley, and Antes and Kuhn appointed for the work in Oley. The former was unable to win back his previous followers, and the latter still more embittered the people by his impoliteness, for which he was finally recalled. The school house referred to in the letter by Jonathan Herbein was completed by Antes and Kuhn. Eschenbach returned to Bethlehem; served for a time as itinerant preacher, but his zeal and ardor were gone. He finally withdrew from the Moravians, and in 1747 settled on a farm near Oley, where he died in 1763. He left a number of descendants. The name has been shortened to Eschbach.

IS KNOWN AS FATHER OF UNIVERSALISM IN AMERICA.

About the same time as Zinzendorf arrived in Pennsylvania another very extraordinary person arrived, whose influence counteracted that of the Moravians in general, and particularly in Oley. He was none other than the famous physician and preacher George de Benneville, who is sometimes spoken of as the father of Universalism in America.

De Benneville made his home for a short time with the noted printer Christopher Sauer in Germantown. Here Jean Bertolett met him and urged him to come to Oley, since there was no physician far and wide. He accompanied Bertolett to Oley, in whose house he stayed and with whose daughter he became infatuated while she attended his school and who, on February 24, 1745, he married. Upon his arrival

in Oley he at once embarked in his profession, also preaching his doctrine of universal salvation, and also conducted a school. He, through the influence of Bertolett, became the teacher in the Moravian school. He disagreed with the doctrines of the Moravians and took special offense at some of the statements of Eschenbach, who in a sermon challenged the people "to come and accept his doctrines and he, in the space of a half hour, would save them."

PREACHES TO THE INDIANS.

De Benneville not only preached in Oley, but throughout the whole province, and frequently went beyond its borders. He also, and sometimes in company with his friend, Jean Bertolett, visited and preached among the Indians. It is said that "crowds attended his services" everywhere. Reichel in his Moravian History, 1734-1748, page 193, makes this statement relative to the work in Oley: "Henry Antes had been installed there as minister, instead of Eschenbach, but he was not able fully to reconcile the embittered minds, and was at last obliged to leave this once promising field to a separatistic minister by the name of Benneville, who gained over the greater part of this congregation, and openly opposed the Brethren." In 1745, upon being excluded from the Moravian school house, and having just married, he erected a large stone mansion, which is still standing, for his bride, in which, on the second floor, he arranged a large room for public services and school purposes. The Moravians still retained a number of adherents, among them the Leinbachs, Samuel Hoch and John Deturck. A large gemein house was erected, which for a time was used for school purposes. This school was widely and favorably known. In 1749 the number of boarding students was 38. This school, along with a number of similar schools throughout the province, became a financial burden to the mother church at Bethlehem, were one after another abandoned, and the pupils taken to Emaus, Bethlehem and Nazareth. The school in Oley was closed in 1751.

In the meantime, under the leadership of John Philip Boehm, a regular Reformed congregation was organized in

Oley and through the efforts of Rev. Henry Melchior Muhlenberg, a Lutheran congregation. And many of the settlers returned to the churches in which they had been confirmed in the fatherland.

The number of Moravian adherents for 1753 is given as 15. In 1765 the Moravians withdrew entirely from Oley. Thus closes one of the most interesting chapters in the history of the Oley Valley.

JNO. BAER STOUDT.