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'From Your Loving Isaac': A Nineteenth-Century Courtship

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“From your Loving Isaac”: A Nineteenth-Century Courtship

By Beth Hostetler Mark *

“Our courtship only lacks one thing to make it a good novel. I will let you guess what that is. I think ours would be alright as far as it has gone but it would not be complete.” Isaac Swalm

For sixty years a packet of late nineteenth-century love letters were stored away in the attic of the Isaac Swalm farm near Duntroon, Ontario. The letters and a photograph, discovered by Isaac’s son, Ernest John (E.J.) Swalm, were written by Isaac to his first love, Minnie Kelly.

These very personal letters of love and faith provide an intimate look at a young man, newly converted to the Brethren in Christ, who is trying to explain his conversion and “plain” lifestyle to his beloved (but Presbyterian) Minnie Kelly. The correspondence is a blend of typical love letters, including declarations of hope for marriage, and an explanation/defense of Brethren in Christ doctrines and practices in the last decade of the nineteenth century. The grammar and spelling in the quotations used throughout have not been changed.

Isaac Swalm’s Background

In the 1830s, Conrad Schwalm and his common-law wife, Mary Ruhl (Isaac’s grandparents), emigrated from Kassel,

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* Beth Hostetler Mark is a great-granddaughter of Isaac Swalm and a librarian at Messiah College.
Germany, to Simcoe County, Ontario. The story of the young family’s harsh first winter, as well as Mary Ruhl’s subsequent near-miraculous conversion from nominal Lutheranism to Brethren in Christ (then known as “Tunkers” in Ontario) has been well documented elsewhere. Following Mary’s dramatic conversion, a Brethren in Christ congregation, Sixth Line, was established near the current village of Duntroon, Ontario.

John Swalm, Isaac’s father, unlike his parents (Conrad and Mary Ruhl Swalm), was a nonbeliever. It is not known whether his wife, Catherine Baker Swalm (also from Brethren in Christ background) was a believer. Isaac was just two years old when John, age twenty-nine, died of tuberculosis. Catherine Swalm subsequently married James McClean. However, in 1872, just seven years after her first husband’s death, Catherine died, orphaning nine-year-old Isaac and his seven-year-old sister, Sarah Catherine. For reasons unknown, rather than being cared for by James McLean or the Swalm or Baker relatives, Isaac was taken in by the family of John and Margaret Kelly (Presbyterians), who lived on a nearby farm. (It is thought that Isaac’s sister, Sarah Catherine, went to live with a family in the Stevensville, Ontario, area, 160 miles from Duntroon.) At the time Isaac came to live with them, the Kellys had an eight-year-old son and three young daughters.

Isaac most likely remained with the Kelly family until his upper teenage years when he moved out to become a live-in farm hand for one of his uncles. It is possible that some of the rental of John Swalm’s farm, bequeathed to young Isaac, helped supplement the Kellys’ income. Nonetheless, Isaac later reflected about his time with the Kellys, “I can almost say [Margaret Kelly] is my mother for she has always been so kind to me.” It is not known whether Isaac attended the Kellys’ church or the Sixth Line Brethren in Christ church. However, in his letters, there are hints that prior to his conversion, at least as an adult, he attended the Presbyterian church. In any case, as a young adult, Isaac was considered by the Brethren in Christ to be quite “worldly” in his dress and behavior and bore no resemblance to his plainly-clad relatives.
When Isaac left the Kelly household, one of their now seven daughters, Minnie, was likely about ten years old. Several years later, when she was eighteen or nineteen, Isaac, now in his upper twenties, began to court Minnie. However, sometime in 1889 or 1890, Minnie broke off her relationship with Isaac and moved to Detroit, Michigan, with her older sister, Elizabeth ("Libbie"). In Detroit, it seems that Minnie and Libbie worked as household maids, although the 1891 Canadian census lists Minnie’s occupation as “dressmaker.”

On January 25, 1891, Minnie, now twenty, wrote a warm letter to Isaac, rekindling their prior relationship. For the next eight months, Isaac and Minnie wrote intimate letters to each other. Only Isaac’s fifteen lengthy letters remain.

Isaac immediately replied to Minnie’s first letter, noting, “It seems no task for me to write you even though we are not so familiar as we were a year ago to-day.” In his third letter (in April), Isaac is effusive regarding Minnie’s most recent letter: “Oh! Minnie, I could not tell you what joy filled my soul at that moment. . . . It seemed to me the most beautiful letter I ever received.” In May, Isaac writes, “It seems to me that there was some higher power . . . that caused you to write to me. I believe it was the will of God and if God be for us who can be against.”

Just one thing hampered the young couple’s renewed courtship—Isaac’s very recent heart-felt conversion (from Presbyterianism) to the Brethren in Christ Church and his adoption of its plain (and rigid) lifestyle. Towards the end of his first letter, Isaac inserts the following in a paragraph otherwise comprised of news and weather: “There is going to be meetings all this week in the Tunkard [Brethren in Christ] church. The two ministers [Fred Elliott and Samuel Baker] that were there last year are coming tomorrow.”

On March 17, 1891, upon receipt of Minnie’s second letter, Isaac comes straight to the point regarding his recent conversion experience: “I was glad to get [your letter] for this reason: I wanted to tell you my feelings since I begun to serve
the Lord, for I felt I should tell you. . . .” Noting his preference for speaking to Minnie in person, Isaac describes his acceptance of the plain lifestyle: “I thought it would be such a hard thing for me to come down to such a plain way but Glory to God when I became willing it was no cross for me.” Continuing, Isaac describes the revival meetings mentioned in his February letter: “There has been a good Revival carried on in the sixth line church [Brethren in Christ]. There was about twenty found peace to their troubled souls.” About his own experience, Isaac writes, “I will never forget the time He spoke peace to my soul. Oh! If I could only tell you the happiness and Love I had.”

Five pages into the letter, Isaac mentions Minnie’s place in relation to Jesus: “You know I thought a lot of you as a friend, but I have found one that is nearer and dearer to me than any earthly friend could be and that is Jesus.”

Concluding the second letter, Isaac raises the specter of a possible impediment to his relationship with Minnie: his conversion and change of lifestyle. “I want you to answer this and if you do not wish me to write any more let me know in your next for my part I am willing to write as long as it is appreciated.” Two weeks later, Minnie’s warm reply allows the courtship by correspondence to continue.

The remaining letters (allowing for inferences from Minnie’s missing letters) have the overarching theme of tension between the couple’s romantic love and Isaac’s need for Minnie to join the Brethren in Christ Church and to become “plain.” A somewhat related thread is Isaac’s ongoing fear that Minnie will break off their relationship when she sees him in person with his plain clothes, long hair, and beard. A further theme: Isaac’s observations about Brethren in Christ church life and beliefs and his thoughts about other denominations.
Isaac Swalm loved Minnie Kelly. His letters are affectionate and include phrases such as: “Good night dear!” In July, Isaac writes, “You spoke of kissing in your last letter. I hope the time will come ere long when we can kiss each other again as we did once.” Minnie also expresses a desire to see Isaac in person: “You [Minnie] said you wished you could talk to me. . . . You said you hoped [we would meet again] soon.”

Although Isaac has fond memories of their prior courtship, he also has regrets. In his second letter, he writes, “I shed many a tear over the way I used you but I know I am forgiven by you and by God too. Still it grieves me to think that I had been living in sin and leading others along in it too.” In a later letter, most likely responding to an apology by Minnie, Isaac says, “You did not keep me from serving the Lord but if we had both obeyed our convictions the time we was at the Tea-meeting in the Presbyterian Church in Stayner we might have been happier to-day but ‘God works in a mysterious way his wonders to perform’.”

By April, Isaac has moved beyond past regrets and begins to broach the topic of marriage, telling Minnie, “I know I could live happier with you than anyone else.” Continuing, he speaks of his dreams for the future: “I often think if we were married how we would read and talk together.” In late April, he writes: “I feel to-night as though we should be married.” In June, Isaac adds, “I love your soul as well as your heart and if it is God's will that we should be married I am sure I would try and be as good to you as I could.”

The Way of the Church and Marriage

There are many references in the letters to Isaac’s love for Minnie, but there are even more expressions of his concern about Minnie’s church membership (Presbyterian) and her spiritual condition. In mid-April, Isaac addresses this issue in
Isaac Swalm before becoming Brethren in Christ (photograph courtesy of Jean Swalm). Like most Brethren in Christ at that time, Swalm preferred not to be photographed, thus no satisfactory pictures of him after his conversion exist.
Minnie (foreground) and Libby Kelly (courtesy of Jean Swalm)
response to Minnie’s most recent letter: “So you think you could do anything to make me happy now. Well Minnie there is no one I love the same as you, and there is no one I can trust as I can you; but you belong to one Church and I belong to another and I know we could not get along very well on that point.” In June, Isaac further specifies, “According to my belief I cannot marry you if you belonged to another Church. . . .” With his usual conflicting emotions, however, he ends the sentence with, “. . . but don't think I do not love you.”

Regarding her personal salvation, Isaac tells Minnie, “You have not been as wicked as some.” Nonetheless, even though Minnie presumably considers herself to be a Christian, he firmly believes that she must experience salvation as he has: “. . . you know we must all work out our souls salvation (by the grace of God) for ourselves. I would like to know the reason you do not.” In reference to their future marriage, Isaac says, “. . . Minnie if we were married and you were truly converted I really believe we could live happy.”

At times, Isaac’s statements regarding Minnie’s salvation contradict themselves. He makes it clear that she must have a conversion experience but in ten of his fifteen letters, Isaac asks Minnie to pray for him. For example, regarding his ability to teach a women’s Sunday school class, he asks, “Pray for me Minnie that I may be more strengthened from day to day, and that I may explain the lesson in such a way that it would be acceptable to God.” On another occasion, Isaac implores, “Now I hope you do not forget me when you are on your knees for I need your prayers that I might be kept faithful to my end.” And lastly, a simple, “Remember me at the throne of Grace.”

Isaac will not compromise in his belief that if they are to marry, Minnie must join the Brethren in Christ Church. He makes an interesting connection between church membership and forgiveness of sins: “I believe if you come down humble and willing to join this Church God will pardon you [y]our sins.” He notes that he will marry her “only on the conditions stated before namely. That you would join my church.” At another point, Isaac states, “. . . the only way to make the best
of it is for you to get converted and join with me, for... my conscience would not allow me [to] join any other [church].”

Becoming Plain

For Isaac, dressing plainly, as noted above, went hand in hand with becoming Brethren in Christ (and, with salvation, for that matter). About his own changed appearance, he writes, “I do not wear a tie or collar. I do not shave and my hair is getting long... I know you will think I am very strange but I am far happier this way than I ever was in fine clothes.” He further offers, “If there is anything you would like to know about my plain clothes or anything like that do not be afraid to ask me.” Making certain that Minnie understands just how different he looks, Isaac more than once describes meeting acquaintances who did not recognize him due to his dramatic change in appearance. In one letter, Isaac writes, “Mary Buie did not know me on Sunday. Monday I was out to Stayner and I saw Neal McEachern and he did not know me going down [the road] and coming back he spoke to [me] and said there was a big change in me.” He continues, “Then Charlie drove up and Neal says ‘Do you know this Farmer?’ (pointing to me) Charlie did not at first. . . .”

Isaac is clear that Minnie must adopt the required plain lifestyle if they are to be married. He understands the difficulty of this decision. In June, he writes, “Now dear Minnie consider it over carefully and prayerfully and see if you could come down so low as to wear the cap and bonnet. Would you be willing to forsake all your friends and stick to me if they were against you joining my church which I really think they will.” For Isaac, there is no room for compromise: “If you think you could not come so plain why I will not be offended if you do not marry me.”

Isaac is not ashamed of his appearance, as noted above, but he expresses concern that when Minnie sees him in person, she might change her mind about marrying him. In July, he writes, “Perhaps when you see me you might change your
prayerfully and see if you could come down so low as to wear the cap and bonnet. Would you be willing to forsake all your friends and stick to me if they were again you joining my church which I really think they will. How Minnie please answer this fully and may God direct you to do what is right. I was thinking if you really meant to join the same church as me how would it be if we were to be married this fall and me work out next summer. I could get that house where Mr. Tom is living.
mind [about marriage].” (This sentiment is echoed in several of Isaac’s letters.) While denying that it is a concern, Isaac worries about Minnie’s reaction to his appearance. Frequently, Isaac writes sentiments such as: “What did [Libbie, Minnie’s sister] say about me. Did she say anything about my Hair or clothes. Don’t be afraid of hurting my feelings for I do not care what people say.”

Isaac writes to Minnie of his conversations with her mother and her sister Jen regarding Minnie’s possible willingness to dress plainly. As if to reassure himself that the change will actually happen, in both cases, Isaac associates the potential change with Minnie’s love for him. Following his conversation with Minnie’s sister, Jen, he reports, “I told her if you would accept me in my plain clothes and all other things you must have a deep love for me and if that was the case I think we would live happy.” In his conversation on the same topic with Margaret Kelly, Minnie’s mother, Isaac uses the identical phrase: “you [Minnie] must have a deep love for me. . . .”

Gender Roles

Responding to Minnie's specific questions, Isaac expresses his views regarding the role of women (and men) in the marriage relationship, reflecting both Brethren in Christ views as well as cultural norms of the times. In one letter, he writes, “You said would I scold you? Well you must not cause me to make any promises but I don’t think you will mind any scolding.” In another letter, Isaac makes it clear that he expects to be the head of the household, or “the boss.” “I will try and make you a[s] happy as I can of course you know that I expect to be boss both inside and out. . . .” Softening this statement somewhat, he continues: “I don’t think there will be any trouble about that for you will try and do what is right and so will I if God gives us grace.” Regarding the household itself, Isaac notes, “I would want the house plain and everything common.”
I want to tell you this that I will not be able to keep you like a city lady but if you are willing to come down in this humble way and accept one I will try and make you a happy as I can. Of course you know that I expect to be good both inside and out but I don't think there will be any trouble about that for you will try and do what is right and so will I if God gives me grace. I would say let us be true followers of the work and loving ladies and I
Brethren in Christ Practices and Beliefs

Side by side with Isaac’s attempts to persuade Minnie of her need for salvation are rich, newsy descriptions of late nineteenth-century Brethren in Christ beliefs and practices. For the historian, these letters provide details not easily available. Because his conversion was so new, Isaac describes in detail the revival meeting, his conversion, his plain lifestyle, his application for church membership, and his baptism. Isaac also writes of church life, including Sunday school, and of his (and the church’s) interaction with other denominations.

Conversion, Baptism, and Church Membership

Mention has already been made of Isaac’s conversion during a winter revival meeting led by Fred Elliott. Isaac credits this conversion for his newfound love for everyone: “There was some I thought I could never love but when I had this love shed abroad in my heart I had a love for all mankind.” In April Isaac tells Minnie that opportunity was given during the Good Friday service for “any one wishing to join [the] Church. . . .” Noting that thirteen individuals made application to join, Isaac further explains the process: “You see when they make application they have to tell how the Lord pardoned them and if they think fit they will receive you if you are willing to obey the commandments. I was one that made application[. O]f course we are not a member of the church until we are baptized which will be administered in June if the Lord is willing and we are spared.” In a subsequent letter, Isaac corrects an apparent misunderstanding on Minnie’s part and cites the church’s beliefs. “I only made application to join the Church and for Baptism. In the Apostles time they had to be baptized first and then join the Church and that is the way the Brethren do. Baptism is the first commandment to observe after we are born again.” Isaac also mentions that he has not yet taken “the Sacrament,” understood to mean Holy Communion.
In a May prayer meeting, Isaac publicly gave his conversion story. Several non-Brethren in Christ neighbors attended, including three of Minnie’s sisters: Jennie, Maggie, and Nellie Kelly. With an eye towards evangelism, Isaac tells Minnie, “Thanks be to God that I had the privilege of speaking of God’s goodness to me in their presence. I spoke and made a short prayer.”

Isaac writes in anticipation of his baptism and of Minnie’s possible presence. “The Love Feast will be here on June 6th and if it is the Lord’s will I will be baptised there. I would like it if you would be here then if you could. I wish you were to be baptised too.” Once again, Isaac asks Minnie to pray, this time for a blessing on the love feast: “Minnie, remember us in your prayers that we might have a season of refreshing from the Lord. That is why they call it a Love Feast.” Regarding the love feast itself, Isaac explains, “you would likely hear a sermon on Baptism.” He further notes that as part of the love feast, the congregation will meet every night of the week. Fred Elliott, the winter evangelist, returned to preside over the love feast events. Isaac’s son, E. J. Swalm, later wrote: “One of the largest classes to ever join the Brethren in Christ Church in [the Nottawa] district at one time” joined during this love feast. He noted: “The baptism service featured two officials administering at one time.” Isaac records that fourteen individuals, including himself, were baptized.

On the last evening of love feast, following a fellowship meal, participation in the act of feet washing preceded the Lord’s Supper. During a visit with Minnie’s sister Jen, Isaac defended the practice of feet washing after Jen insisted that it was not a biblical command. Isaac reports to Minnie: “I said Oh! Jennie don’t say that and I just opened the book and read part of the 13 chapter of St. John’s Gospel to the end of the 17th verse and I said to her isn’t that as plain as words can make it.”
Sunday School

In 1890, the year prior to Isaac's conversion, the Sixth Line congregation, led by Charles Baker, began a Sunday school. E. Morris Sider notes that Baker believed that the large number of converts following the 1890 revival "needed instruction in the faith, which he and his colleagues considered could be done by means of a Sunday school." Isaac’s letters provide interesting insights into the new Sunday school which he says had an average attendance of sixty. Isaac observes, "Some people think we did very wrong in opening up a new Sunday school but I don’t think so. May God help us that we may do all things to His honor and glory. In the cities or towns every Church have their own Sunday schools and why not in the country.” This defense refers to the Mennonite Brethren in Christ Sunday school, which met at the same hour and which had previously been attended by Sixth Line’s members.

As previously noted, Isaac became a Sunday school teacher very soon after his conversion. Sunday school teachers were apparently elected by Sunday school members. About the election, Isaac writes, "I was the last one that was moved and I had the first vote and the whole school rose for me." Isaac served in two capacities: “I have a class of small boys besides and when the Ladies Bible Class teacher is absent I have to teach it. . . .” Interestingly, Isaac began teaching adult women, many of whom would have been long-time church members, before he joined the church himself. In May, he tells Minnie: “Last Sunday I taught the ladies Bible class for the first time. I felt nervous and my inability to teach such a big class.”

Other Denominations

Although Isaac frequently protests that he does not condemn other churches, in fact, he does—at least main-line (particularly Presbyterian) denominations. In one letter he writes, “Minnie do not take it hard of me but Churches now
days they do not keep the commandments hence they have no promise. How can we be a follower of Christ if we do not do what he told us to do. I know Minnie you . . . will think I am very prejudiced but if I did not feel it my duty to tell you, I would not.” In a subsequent letter, Isaac states, “I do not condemn other Churches but the Lord showed me I could not join them and be his follower.” Responding to Minnie’s sister Jen’s statement that there were “as good Christians in other churches as in [the Brethren in Christ],” Isaac says, “I . . . could judge no person. I said if they do not obey the commandments they have no promise.” Following this harsh statement, Isaac makes a rare allowance for God’s grace in judging those who are not Brethren in Christ. He says, “. . . God can be merciful to whom he will.”

Regarding the soundness of Brethren in Christ doctrine compared to that of other churches, Isaac states that he joined the Brethren in Christ “because I thought it was the nearest to the Scriptures. . . .” In this context, he challenges Minnie: “If you think any other church is nearer why join it and I will be willing to give you up but let me add this Search the Scriptures prayer-fully and God will show you what is required of you.” Isaac also compares the Brethren in Christ to the early church martyrs. “The Martyrs claimed that there was only one Church . . . when I read their Faith it corresponds with the Brethren in Christ. . . .” He continues, noting that it was against the rules of the martyrs to marry outside their church.

Somewhat contradicting his comments regarding other denominations are Isaac’s more collegial comments regarding the Mennonite Brethren in Christ Church (MBIC), which had very similar beliefs to the Brethren in Christ.17 Isaac, and presumably other Brethren in Christ members, occasionally attended MBIC services. However, Isaac also has some criticism for this denomination as well, specifically about the age of baptism: “I was at the [MBIC] Camp-meetings two nights and that was enough for me. They baptized 33 but they were all children but about 9 or 10.” One can infer from this statement that for the Brethren in Christ at that time, the
approved age for baptism and church membership, was considerably higher.

Isaac expressed some further resentment towards the Mennonite Brethren in Christ congregation. It seems that the Sixth Line Brethren in Christ congregation and the local MBIC congregation at one point alternated hosting a Sunday morning service. Isaac records, “The Mennonites have Church too this morning. They know it was our turn to have it but they did not ask us to lift our appointment so there will be services in both Churches.” Softening his tone, he adds, “But God can be present everywhere at the same time.” E. Morris Sider notes that there was a rivalry between the two congregations: “Exacerbating the rivalry were the livelier services in the Grange hall, as well as the attraction of the Mennonite Brethren in Christ Sunday school at a time when the Tunkers [Brethren in Christ] had none.” Due to these factors, some Tunker families joined the Mennonite Brethren in Christ congregation.18

Isaac is aware of the large amount of church/faith-related content in his letters. He acknowledges to Minnie: “Perhaps my letters are mono[to]nous to you; all about religion. I can’t help talking of God’s goodness to me.” In his final letter, Isaac again speculates, “Maybe you will be tired of so much religion.”

The Novel’s Conclusion

In August, Isaac reflects: “Our courtship only lacks one thing to make it a good novel. I will let you guess what that is. I think ours would be alright as far as it has gone but it would not be complete. Yes Minnie I hope our days may be happier in the future, and that they might be happy in the Lord is my prayer, so that we might have an entrance into that Heavenly Jerusalem where all tears shall be wiped away.”

During the summer months, Isaac continues to hope for a happy conclusion to his courtship of Minnie. Yet, his level of hope fluctuates, partially based on Minnie’s willingness to
return home. At the end of May he begins pressing Minnie regarding marriage: “I would like to know if you were satisfied with what I said about our getting married. I would like to know if you intend to get married this Fall or would you rather wait a couple of years please give me your full desires.” In early June, he continues, “I was thinking if you really meant to join the same church as me how would it be if we were to be married this Fall...” Isaac notes that he would like Fred Elliott to perform the wedding ceremony (should they get married).

At the end of June Minnie tells Isaac that she prefers to wait a year to marry. In a rare expression of disappointment and loneliness, Isaac responds, “... if you think so, I suppose I will be satisfied, but I thought I would have a home and some one to talk to as well, one that would share my troubles.” Given the postponement, Isaac says, “I think it is necessary that we should see one another this Fall and talk the matter over.” In July, Isaac met with Minnie’s mother to ask if she had any objections to the marriage (she did not). In the same letter, anticipating Minnie’s return visit, Isaac suggests, “Do not get any very stylish clothes for I would rather if you would be as plain as you can.”

In Isaac’s final letter, written on August 30, he is both concerned and hopeful. On the one hand, he tells Minnie, “I think it very necessary to see each other for there are many things I would like to talk about, before I would like to bind ourselves again.” For the first time, Isaac implies that his church may not approve of their courtship. “You know I am going a little against the doctrine of our church or rules of our church. I should not marry one outside unless consented by the Church.” Noting again their need to talk in person, he adds, “... if we consider it best not to marry, why there’ll be no harm done.” On the other hand, Isaac assures Minnie of his continued love for her: “Don’t think that I have grown cold towards you for it is not the case. I love your soul as well as your heart and I would not like to deceive you in any way for we have all to appear before the judgment seat of Christ there to give an account of the deeds done here.” He asks one last
time, “Have you came across anyone you love as much as me and that you feel you could live as happy with and serve God faithfully...[?]”

Most likely, Minnie returned to Ontario in September. One can only speculate as to what transpired when she and Isaac met. It seems probable that despite her love for Isaac and her desire and promise to marry him, just as Isaac feared, Minnie could not take the step of becoming plain and Brethren in Christ. The letters of Isaac Swalm to Minnie Kelly illustrate the personal ramifications of the Brethren in Christ Church’s belief in separation from the world. Given that Isaac’s salvation was integrally woven in with his adherence to the Brethren in Christ, he had but one choice, voiced frequently in his letters: “According to my belief I cannot marry you if you belonged to another Church.”

Epilogue

As the reader knows, Isaac chose to keep the letters that Minnie returned to him. He also kept her photograph. Although the Swalms have remained friends with the Kelly family to the present, the last living Kelly in the area does not know what happened to Minnie following her break up with Isaac. In 1896, five years after these letters were written, at the age of thirty-three, Isaac married Alice Sammons, with whom he had two children, Ernest John and Sarah Jane Pearl. Ironically, prior to marriage, Alice was Mennonite Brethren in Christ. Widowed in 1908, Isaac married Alice’s sister, Sarah Sammons, in 1909. Sarah lived less than a year. In 1912, Isaac married Barbara Horner, who was originally Brethren in Christ; she also preceded him in death.

Isaac Swalm died of cancer at the age of sixty-six. The letters Isaac wrote to Minnie tell the beginning of Isaac’s story with the Brethren in Christ. His obituary provides the end of that story: “Bish. [Isaac] Swalm had a marvelous conversion thirty-seven years ago. At which time he united with the Brethren in Christ Church in Nottawa District, where he
served God, and the church of his choice in a true and loyal manner. Always manifesting an exceptional zeal for the advancement of the Lord’s cause. He was conservative in church polity, but never dogmatic or unreasonable. He served the Church in the ministerial capacity for nearly seventeen years, and as Bishop of the district nearly five years. His removal by the hand of death is a heavy loss to the Church at large, to the district which he served so energetically, to the home, and community, where he had the confidence of practically every one, and where he wielded an influence for good such as perhaps few men exert.”

Isaac and Alice Swalm’s son, E.J. Swalm, became a well-known evangelist and bishop of the Canadian Conference of the Brethren in Christ. Their daughter Pearl worked for a time at Messiah College and was an evangelistic tent meeting assistant and long-time Sunday school teacher. Isaac’s grandchildren and several of his great-grandchildren have been active members of the Brethren in Christ Church.

NOTES

1 Isaac Swalm’s letters were subsequently passed on to E.J. Swalm’s daughter, Lela Swalm Hostetler, who shared them with her daughter (the writer of this article), who currently has them. Copies of the typed transcript of the letters reside in the Brethren in Christ Archives in Grantham, PA, as well as in the Canadian Brethren in Christ Archives. Interested readers may request a copy of the transcript from the author at bmark@messiah.edu


3 The congregation established exists today as the Stayner Brethren in Christ Church.

4 Jean Swalm, e-mail to Beth Mark, June 4, 2009.

5 Later in life, Sarah Catherine Swalm (Saylor then Jones) used the nickname “Kate.”

6 Jean Swalm interview, July 2007. Jean recalls hearing these details about Isaac and his sister (after Catherine died) from her
father, E.J. Swalm. She does not know with certainty at what age Isaac went to live with the Kellys and at what age he left nor that his sister lived with a family in Ridgeway.

7The 1881 Canadian Census lists Isaac (age eighteen) as part of the Melchi Swalm family (Isaac’s uncle). Since Melchi’s children were all younger than Isaac, the author assumes that Isaac lived there to help with the farm. Melchi Swalm’s farm was across the road from the Kelly family. In subsequent years Isaac worked for/boarded with at least two other uncles: Conrad Swalm and Samuel Baker.

8Whether Isaac technically owned John Swalm’s farm as a child is not known. At the time the letters were written, Isaac was working at his Uncle Sam (Cober) Baker’s farm, while renting his (formerly John Swalm’s) farm to his uncle Conrad Swalm. From The Historical Atlas of Simcoe County Ontario (1871), reprinted (Port Elgin, Ont.: Cumming Atlas Reprints, 1975) we know that James McLean and Catherine Swalm McLean lived on what was John Swalm’s farm. It seems that following Catherine’s death, James McLean did not make a claim of ownership on the farm. In the 1890 edition of the Farmer’s Directory for the County of Simcoe (included in the above atlas), Isaac Swalm’s name appears on the original John Swalm farm lot. Isaac was twenty-seven at the time.

9All quotations by Isaac Swalm are taken from fifteen letters written to Minnie Kelly between February 3 and August 30, 1891.

10In one letter Isaac refers to “our church,” in a context meaning his and Minnie’s church (prior to his conversion).

11Jean Swalm.

12Ernest John Swalm. A History of the Brethren in Christ in the Nottawa District, 1878–1978. (Stayner, Ont.: Stayner Brethren in Christ Church, 1978). E.J. Swalm writes of his father’s conversion experience during the 1891 series of meetings at which Fred Elliot gave the invitation each evening. “My father was gloriously saved during that divine visitation of power in conviction, repentance, and conversion. I heard him describe numerous thrilling incidents occurring during those hallowed days.” Isaac Swalm’s conversion story is very similar to the experience of other Brethren in Christ, as described in Sider, Brethren in Christ in Canada, p. 69: “As testified to by many members, the process began with the sinner becoming keenly conscious of his sin and of being in a lost condition. This condition weighed heavily on the sinner’s heart (creating a state of conviction), the more so as he or she considered what it would mean to yield to God. Finally, after much struggle, the sinner began to
obey, among other ways by showing repentance, making confession and restitution (repayment) for harm done to others, and changing habits and patterns of living. Having done all this, the sinner reached a crisis, which he resolved by exercising faith in Christ and receiving the forgiveness of sins. Then great joy filled the former sinner’s heart for now the load of sin was lifted from him; he now was a member of the family of God. He made his new life in Christ known to the church by rising in a meeting and declaring his intention to be a child of God and to be obedient to the Word.”

13 Sider, *Brethren in Christ in Canada*, pp. 77-78. Sider notes that in the nineteenth century, Brethren in Christ men “wore long jacket coats reaching nearly to the knees, with a split tail in the back and an erect (or military) collar.” Further, men were to grow beards and part their hair in the center. When debating the issue of long hair with Minnie’s sister Jen, Isaac supports his argument by quoting Philippians 4:5: “Let your moderation be known to all men.”

14 Ibid., p. 78. “Women wore long dresses of dark colours—black, blue, brown without figures and gathered at the waist. Over the top part of the dress they placed a separate piece covering the shoulders: The piece came to a point at the middle of the body both in front and back and was held in place by pins.” On their heads, women wore prayer veilings (or “coverings”). “Over the top of the covering women wore a bonnet when out of doors, both to protect the covering from the weather, and relatedly, to preserve the sanctity of the prayer veiling.”

15 Ibid., p. 135.

16 Ibid., p. 21.

17 Harold S. Bender. “Mennonite Brethren in Christ.” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. 1957. [retrieved May 5, 2009], available from http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/M465ME.html. The Mennonite Brethren in Christ Church (MBIC) was formed in 1883 from joining two denominations: the Evangelical United Mennonite and a Brethren in Christ group in Ohio, known as the Swankites. The latter broke with the Brethren in Christ in 1938. The MBIC, with its “emphasis upon evangelism and aggressive work, conversion and Christian experience with a warm, rather emotional piety . . .,” and nonresistance and nonconformity, shared most beliefs and practices with the Brethren in Christ. The Mennonite Brethren in Christ denomination later became the United Missionary Church and currently carries the name Missionary Church.
The writer has been unable to locate any subsequent local newspaper announcements (marriage, death, etc.) to document Minnie Kelly’s continued residence in the Duntroon, Ontario, area.