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Maggie Leah Steckley Swalm: A Teacher of Good Things

By Beth Hostetler Mark and Louann Swalm Walker *

“I was a shy little girl; I wouldn’t talk if anybody was around,” Maggie Steckley Swalm recalled. “When company came, we younger children would sit on the couch all lined up and never say a word . . . and people thought that we were little angels. But they couldn’t see behind the scenes!” Much of Maggie’s adult life and her considerable sphere of influence might be described as occurring “behind the scenes.” Behind the scenes with Maggie, however, was a lively and an encouraging place to be.

A Steckley Childhood

On March 6, 1895, Peter and Sarah (Heise) Steckley welcomed their eighth child, Maggie Leah, into their Whitchurch Township farmhouse, seven miles east of Stouffville, Ontario. Peter Steckley was a minister of the Markham Brethren in Christ congregation (currently the Heise Hill Church) and later became bishop of the Markham District. Both the Steckley and Heise families had roots in the early days of the Brethren in Christ Church in Ontario,

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having migrated to Canada from Pennsylvania in the early 1800s.

By all accounts, the Peter and Sarah Steckley household in which Maggie was raised was a lively and loving place where a strong work ethic was the norm, yet where family fun and laughter were never given short shrift. Maggie recalled evenings at home when “Father would entertain us children. He used to get down on his hands and knees and give us a piggy back ride or we’d play tag or blind man’s bluff or hide and seek. . . .” Sarah Steckley was quieter and more serious than her gregarious husband.

The Steckley children dressed in the traditional plain garb of the early Brethren in Christ and were part of the tightly-knit Markham congregation. However, perhaps because the family lived six miles away from the nucleus of Markham church families at Gormley, the parents and children frequently interacted with members of their local community. As a boy in Bethesda, Ontario (near present-day Newmarket), Maggie’s father, Peter Steckley, at times attended the Methodist and Baptist Sunday schools close to home. In fact, he wrote that he was led to Christ by a Methodist teacher and later experienced the “wooings of the Holy Spirit” at a Baptist revival meeting.

Exposure beyond Brethren in Christ circles possibly helped an adult Peter Steckley to be at ease in his role as a member of the local school board. Because of their father’s board membership, each of his fourteen children, in turn, was responsible for the daily upkeep chores at the school. Maggie remembered, “When I was the oldest one [in school] . . . I had to make [the] fires. . . . We had to sweep the floors and everything before we could go home.”

Maggie’s formal schooling ended with the eighth grade. The teenaged Steckley daughters were sometimes asked to work in the homes of community members who needed assistance. While hired out to other families, Maggie helped with household chores and twice acted as a midwife. Unlike most hired girls, however, Maggie noted that she sometimes “worked outside in the fields like any man, drove the mower
The Peter and Sarah Steckley farm house at Whitchurch, Ontario. Standing on the porch, left to right: Sarah Steckley (Heise), Ruth Steckley (Cober Stickley), Mary Steckley (Lehman). Sitting on the porch, left to right; Sarah Steckley (died in childhood), Rhoda Steckley (Sheffer), Cora Steckley (Cloke). The identities of the boys on the lawn are unknown.

Houses on the Swalm farm. Maggie (Steckley) Swalm is standing in the doorway of the original house. The house built for Isaac and Barbara (Horner) Swalm is on the right.
and cut hay." Maggie always preferred working outside, especially with the animals.

At the age of nineteen, Maggie spoke in her church about the ups and downs of her spiritual life. She confessed that she "went forward [to the altar] different times for sanctification but did not seem to grasp it. . . ." On the night of February 6, 1914, however, Maggie was pleased to declare that she was "saved and sanctified." Her testimony concluded, "I am glad tonight that I am one of His chosen ones, I want to be used of Him to His honor and glory." 6

Maggie and her sisters, Mary and Ruth, were numbers "seven, eight, and nine of the family." The sisters shared a bedroom where they told each other stories and laughed into the night. Maggie was particularly gifted at telling stories that included voice and mannerism impersonations of key figures. With an unusual (for the time) wish for independence, Maggie said that the three had "planned to be old maids and live in a house [together]. . . . We'd have a great time living by ourselves and doing as we liked."

Courtship, Marriage, and Children

A house for the three sisters was not to be as first Mary, then Ruth, left home to marry. Soon thereafter, Ernest John Swalm, a nineteen-year-old young man from the Brethren in Christ congregation at Stayner (about seventy-five miles away) became "enamoured of a beautiful, blackeyed, brunette with wavy hair." On the day of his twentieth birthday (January 25, 1917), Ernie, as Maggie came to call him, declared in writing his wish to court her. Both later recounted their excitement at the interchange. Maggie recalled, "I opened [the letter] as fast as I could and found out what was in it and I quickly answered it and accepted the invitation." Ernie was "in mid-air" when he received Maggie’s reply. 7

The long-distance courtship was comprised of Ernie’s occasional train visits to the Steckley farm as well as numerous letters exchanged by mail. This time of happiness
was interrupted in 1918 (the last year of World War I) when Ernie was drafted into the Canadian Army. Due to his stance as a conscientious objector, Ernie was “court-martialed and sentenced to two years hard labour.” Maggie supported Ernie’s pacifist position and the couple continued to write to each other while Ernie was imprisoned in St. Catharines, Ontario.

To Maggie’s relief, after just ten weeks of incarceration, Ernie was released on parole and plans for their wedding proceeded. On January 21, 1920, wedding vows were exchanged in the bride’s home with both fathers, Bishop Peter Steckley and The Reverend Isaac Swalm, officiating. It was so cold that the bride wore long underwear under her white cashmere dress and stockings. The highlight of the couple’s wedding trip was attending Bible Conference with other Brethren in Christ young people at Messiah Bible School (now Messiah College) in Grantham, Pennsylvania.

Upon returning to Ontario, Maggie joined Ernie on his parents’ one-hundred-acre farm near the village of Duntroon. The newly-married couple lived with Ernie’s father and stepmother, Isaac and Barbara (Horner) Swalm, and Ernie’s sister, Pearl, while a new house was built immediately adjacent. By fall, Ernie’s father, stepmother, and sister moved into the new house and Maggie and Ernie began to create their own home.

Maggie had but one hesitation about her marriage to Ernie: “I always thought I wouldn’t want to marry a minister because I knew they were away from home a lot.” Maggie had observed firsthand how her mother had to care for the large Steckley family on her own when Peter Steckley was traveling as an evangelist. In their second year of marriage, Maggie’s worries proved true when Ernie told her of his call to the ministry.

Before long, Ernie was invited to conduct several weeks of revival meetings away from home and, as Maggie commented, “I was left [alone] just as I thought I wouldn’t want to be.” One evening Maggie confided to Ernie her anxieties about a future filled with long separations. Ernie,
Ernest John Swalm at the time of his engagement to Maggie Steckley
Maggie Steckley at the time of her engagement to Ernest John (E.J.) Swalm
who had not yet come to this realization, described what happened next: “With tears and prayers, we deepened our dedication to include this type of Christian service, should it be God’s will for us, even though the price seemed almost prohibitive.”

After three years of waiting, Maggie and Ernie’s first child, daughter Lela, was born in 1923. Maggie recalled, “I was thrilled to [have] a little child . . . that we could love and cuddle up.” Four more years went by before a second daughter, Jean, was born in 1927, followed by a third daughter, Mildred, in 1930. Fourteen months after the birth of Mildred, Maggie had a difficult breech delivery of a baby son, Ray. For a time, the infant’s survival was uncertain and there was great rejoicing when he began to thrive.

**Family Transitions**

For the first several years of Ernie’s evangelistic ministry, Maggie’s in-laws lived next door and provided her with help and emotional support during his absences. However, in 1928 Barbara Swalm died unexpectedly of a heart attack and just one year later, Isaac Swalm died from cancer. Following the deaths of the older Swalms, Maggie suddenly found herself in charge of the farm and four young children during Ernie’s frequent and extended absences.

After Peter Steckley died in 1924, Maggie’s mother, Sarah, often came to help while Ernie was away. In 1928, Ernie’s sister Pearl, who had been serving in home mission work in Welland, Ontario, returned home to help her widowed father. Following Isaac Swalm’s death, Ernie, Maggie, and the children moved into the newer house. Pearl also lived with Ernie and Maggie until the fall of 1934, when she accepted an invitation to become Preceptress of Women at Messiah Bible School. Even when Pearl was home to help, however, there was a need for full-time male assistance on the farm.
Providentially, in 1930 a group of young unemployed Englishmen arrived in Ontario, finding temporary refuge with families of the Howick Brethren in Christ congregation. Soon thereafter, Ernie brought one of the teenaged lads home to help on the Swalm farm. As Lela Swalm Hostetler relates, John Patfield “moved right in and became part of the family.” John’s strong work ethic, his keen intellect, and his delightful sense of humor were just what the Swalm family needed. When in her eighties, Maggie was pleased that John was still calling her “Mother.”

In 1938, the dynamics of the Swalm household changed again. John Patfield married and left the Swalm’s employ and, following a bout with depression, Ernie’s sister Pearl moved back to the Swalm farm. Having Pearl back home for good, and living with the six-member family, was an adjustment for everyone.

As siblings, Ernie and Pearl were very close. Ernie described their relationship: “Since I had no other brothers or sisters, we became very much attached to each other. . . . [She] exerted a telling influence on my life for 60 years.” Adding another layer of complexity to the Swalm family dynamics, Pearl had inherited part of the farm, providing her with a discretionary income. Yet, by moving back to a house with only three bedrooms, Pearl needed to adjust to sharing her bedroom with two young nieces.

Maggie, on the other hand, was Ernie’s wife, mother of their children, and the household manager. The situation was rife for sister/sister-in-law tensions. In their adolescent years, the children began to resent some of their Aunt Pearl’s actions and to feel a strong allegiance toward Maggie. For example, when Ernie was away for extended periods, letters addressed to Maggie were sometimes opened and read first by Pearl. When Ernie was home, it was Pearl who sat and talked with him for long spells while Maggie laundered (and often repacked) his clothing and worked on other household tasks. Jean Swalm speculates that Pearl’s familiarity with Pennsylvania people and her interest in church business led to the siblings’ lengthy conversations. As Pearl’s only
immediate family and due to his own keen interest in church issues, Ernie was no doubt reluctant to discourage Pearl’s attention and may have been unaware of how hurtful this behavior was to his wife.14

At times, Pearl would take the older Swalm children aside individually, chastising them about something they had done. The children’s periodic talking back to her on these occasions had interesting consequences. Every time there was a revival (evangelistic) meeting at Stayner church, Lela and some of her siblings found themselves under conviction for their behavior towards their aunt and felt compelled to apologize to “Auntie Pearl.”

To paint a picture of continuous conflict between Maggie and Pearl, however, would be inaccurate and unfair. Their working styles were complementary. Pearl preferred inside work and Maggie preferred to work outside. As a newcomer to the family, Maggie’s daughter-in-law, Winnie Johnson Swalm, observed this productive work division firsthand. Winnie adds that Maggie tried to be sensitive to Pearl’s physical limitations. On more than one occasion, Maggie commented that Pearl “is not as strong as I am.” (Pearl was prone to sick headaches, whereas Maggie was rarely ill.) Winnie’s mother, Frances Johnson Bowles who lived next door to the Swalms for a number of years, observed about Maggie and Pearl: “They seemed to get along pretty well together. Pearl would often ask [whether] it was . . . okay to do something. They never . . . said things about one another.” Frances adds, “It must have been hard not having her privacy sometimes, but [Maggie] never complained.”15 The same could be said of Pearl.

One thing is clear: Pearl’s presence in the Swalm home, from 1938 to 1958, in many ways gave Maggie more flexibility. In the winter, both Pearl and Maggie spent more concentrated time on sewing. Sometimes Maggie would do the daily household chores while Pearl spent a full day or two sewing on women’s prayer coverings (a small side business). And Pearl would do the same in return so that Maggie, for example, was able to sew or work on other projects without
interruption. When the children were young, Pearl provided convenient childcare, allowing Maggie to occasionally visit neighbors or attend prayer meetings without four children in tow. For the periods that Maggie’s widowed invalid mother, Sarah Steckley, lived in the household, Pearl provided respite care, enabling Maggie to alternate turns attending church and cottage prayer meetings. Given the potential for serious conflict, the two most important women in Ernie Swalm’s life managed to get along remarkably well with each other.

The Wife of E. J. Swalm

The Swalms’ lives were ordered by the seasons—the growing season, the cycles of animal reproduction, and the pattern of Ernie’s absences. For decades, “New Year’s Day was . . . sad because Daddy had already left for [Brethren in Christ] board meetings in Pennsylvania,” Lela recalls. Evangelistic meetings were scheduled to begin immediately following the board meetings. Ernie was often away for much of January, February, and March, with only short visits home interspersed. Pearl Swalm recorded in her diary a typical example of Ernie’s speaking schedule, noting on March 2, 1932, that Ernie had spent “a lovely [seven] weeks in” Pennsylvania. At that time the Swalm children ranged in age from one year (Ray) to nine years (Lela). Maggie’s diaries indicate that Ernie was away either on church business or as an evangelist an average of 116 days per year between 1947 and 1960. In some highly-scheduled years, Ernie was absent from the Swalm home for over 180 days per year. In his lifetime, E. J. Swalm held over 300 series of evangelistic meetings.

As young children, the Swalm siblings rarely saw evidence of Maggie’s loneliness, nor did she ever express any resentment towards Ernie or his ministries. As the children matured, however, they became more attuned to Maggie’s emotions in relation to the long separations from her husband. “[Mother] often would be very bothered or almost depressed
just before Dad had to leave again for another trip,” Ray recalls. “She would . . . retire to her bedroom to pray right after he left, and cry, but . . . when she came out of the bedroom her head was held high and she was ready to conquer the responsibilities she had.”

By the late 1930s, E. J. Swalm, as Ernie became known to others, had become a respected name in Mennonite and Brethren in Christ circles. In 1940, he was elected as chair of the politically active Conference of Historic Peace Churches (CHPC), comprised of three divisions of Mennonites, Brethren in Christ, Church of the Brethren, Society of Friends, and a few others. Ernie was also part of the CHPC sub-committee that sought government-recognized conscientious objector status for CHPC members of draft age.

There is no doubt that Maggie greatly missed Ernie. Much later in life, she recalled, “There were times that I . . . was bogged down.” Nonetheless, Maggie parented her children well and ably managed the farm on her own. In Ernie’s absence, Maggie led family devotions around the breakfast table, disciplined the children, supervised the hired man, and helped with the chores. (Maggie named every farm animal and even had a pet rooster named Dick, who was nasty to everyone but her.) Maggie made sure the family got to church meetings by horse and wagon or sleigh. At a later time, Ray recalls that his mother “had no license or experience, but she was successful in getting the old Plymouth chugging to a steady pace. We got to church and back home again safely.” Generally, however, Maggie sought rides from people who passed by the Swalm farm on their way to church.

Maggie cared for her children’s ailments with a variety of home remedies. Some of the more memorable treatments were: a spoonful of kerosene mixed with brown sugar for the croup, a drop of electric oil for an aching ear, a hot mustard plaster for congestion, and sulfur blown through a straw onto a sore throat. Ray notes that Maggie’s philosophy was, “Cleanse the infected area.” Fortunately the children all survived both their illnesses and some of Maggie’s more questionable remedies.
Disciplining the children was done by Maggie most of the time, whether or not Ernie was home. Ray relates that sometimes when he and Milly misbehaved in church “[Mother would] march us out, past the nursery to the porch attached to the church and grab a piece of kindling and spank us.” The dreaded punishment, however, occurred at home when the children realized that Maggie, out of exasperation, had gone to her bedroom to pray for them, or when she prayed with them individually over a misdeed. Ray notes, “To make amends we became very saintly and offered to help at whatever task was pressing.”

Maggie loved to celebrate family events such as birthdays. Although pies and apple dumplings were her forte, birthday cakes in the Swalm household always held a special surprise. Maggie wrapped coins individually in waxed paper and inserted them into the cake, so that each person would find a surprise in their serving.

All of the children had warm memories of their mother’s comforting presence. Ray recalls, “When I was very young, maybe two or three, if I was upset, crying or in a fretful state she would often sit me on her lap and rock me in the old rocking chair and sing to me, or tell me stories and poems.” Lela remembers, “I think my very favorite time was when she read stories to me when I was little.” As they grew older, including their teenage years, the children sought Maggie out for her wise counsel. She was a good and compassionate listener for each of her very different children. Maggie kept all of the children’s personal concerns confidential. Daughter Jean notes that Maggie knew theology. “She taught us the truths from God’s word and carried a concern that her children would grow up to serve the Lord. There were times when she preached, too, to a congregation of four!” Milly emphasized, “Her life spoke more loudly to me than all the ministers put together.”

A neighbor who did repair work at the Swalm home summarized Maggie’s capabilities well: “Maggie in her quiet way always got along very well in E. J.’s [Ernie’s] absence.” For his part, Ernie never took Maggie’s role in his ministry for
Ernie wrote letters expressing both his loneliness for Maggie and his deep love and appreciation for the sacrifices she made in support of his evangelistic and church ministries. In 1960, on their fortieth anniversary, he wrote, “Where have these 40 years gone to? True we have spent most of them apart due to my call to the work of God and the church but you have had the heavier end of the service. . . .” Ernie’s self-described call was to save souls, but he graciously credited his Maggie’s influence and example for their children’s salvation and for their service to the church as adults.  

A Hub of Winter Activities

Winter on the Swalm farm was a time of social activity as well as work. The wood stove was the “centre of attraction in the winter as we sat around it eating popcorn, nuts or apples,” Jean remembers. “Mother dried apples in the oven which we could munch on freely.” Maggie had a lifelong love of playing competitive games of all kinds—crokinole, dominoes, anagrams, and other more active games, both with her family and with invited neighborhood and church guests. Jean recalls, “We spent many hours on winter evenings playing games, pushing back the furniture to make room for ‘Blind man’s Bluff,’ etc.” When a friend gave the family a croquet set one summer, Maggie got the whole family out on the front lawn to play.

Parlor games and playing tricks on the hired men particularly tickled Maggie. In one favorite trick, Maggie claimed that she could make a glass of water stick to the ceiling. She would get up on a chair, put the glass of water up to the ceiling and hold it in place with a yard stick. The skeptical hired man (or guest) would then be directed to hold the glass there while she got down from the chair. Ray notes, “Of course the victim would continue to hold it so as not to get wet and Mom would say, ‘See, it’s sticking to the ceiling!’” Like her mother, Maggie sewed or knitted all of her children’s clothing and her own (including underwear and
stockings). Maggie created her own patterns and, at her daughters’ requests, sometimes copied dress styles from the newspaper. “[Mother] would pick out very pretty prints for our dresses,” Jean recalls. “Later these print scraps were used in [the] many quilts that she made.” In addition to sewing for family members, Maggie occasionally sewed dresses and prayer coverings for other church women.26

“Our house wasn’t very spacious,” Jean notes, “but somehow there was always room for a quilt frame.” Often a neighbor or two came to help and, after returning to the farm, Pearl became a frequent quilting companion. Many of the quilts were made for use in the Swalm home and later as gifts for grown children and grandchildren. A number of the quilts, however, were given to those in need.

Sewing Circle and World Relief

During the years surrounding World War II, Brethren in Christ and Mennonite women’s Sewing Circles supported the Mennonite Central Committee’s (MCC) significant relief efforts in Europe during and after the war.27 “Mother was very involved in the Sewing Circle,” Jean says. “For years during and after the war the ladies faithfully made quilts . . . and other things needed overseas.” The women knitted socks and sweaters, prepared infant and school kits, collected old woolens that were made into blankets, and sorted and repaired large volumes of used clothing. All of these were sent to the MCC distribution center in Kitchener, Ontario.

In many ways, Sewing Circle, MCC relief efforts, and Maggie Swalm made a happy partnership. MCC relied on hard-working, task-oriented, dedicated women to achieve its far-reaching relief goals and Maggie Swalm was just right for the job.28 For several of the most active years (ca.1940–1956), the Stayner Sewing Circle women elected Maggie as their president, recognizing her gifts as a leader and manager.

As president, Maggie coordinated all of the clothing relief efforts and was responsible for preparing scores of quilt tops
for the church women to quilt at Sewing Circle meetings. Maggie sent away to Eaton’s department store for cotton scraps (free for charitable purposes). Lela and Jean remember the excitement of opening flat boxes of colorful print scraps that arrived in the mail from Toronto. Maggie’s diaries are sprinkled with references to Sewing Circle: “Put quilt-blocks together for Sewing Circle.” “I . . . went to town in the afternoon to do shopping and send a box of clothing to Kitchener.” At least once, Maggie and other Sewing Circle members toured the MCC Clothing Depot in Kitchener where used clothing was sorted for distribution.29

Lucille Marr notes that involvement in Sewing Circles “gave women a public opportunity beyond their domestic chores. . . .” Although men were not members, Sewing Circle nonetheless was a recognized church organization with elected officials in many Brethren in Christ congregations, including Stayner. Marr observes, “Unfortunately, this ministry [Sewing Circle] is rarely given credit by church leaders or in history books.”30

“Come for a Visit”

Summer at the Swalm farm was a time of non-stop hospitality. Through his denomination-wide (and beyond) evangelistic meetings, Ernie developed hundreds of friendships with Americans and Canadians. And over several decades, a steady stream of Americans journeyed north to the Swalm farm in the summer, often unannounced. Ernie’s involvement with the Conference of Historic Peace Churches brought many Mennonite families to the Swalms’ door as well. “The summer of 1945 during July and August,” Jean notes, “we weren’t 48 hours without company.” She adds, “Mother never seemed to complain, though tired. She could always cook up a good meal with very few supplies.”

Overnight accommodations and meals were only part of the Swalms’ hospitality. Guests were often treated to a visit to nearby Wasaga Beach (on the Georgian Bay of Lake Huron),
and, if staying for several days, taken on a tour of the Scenic Caves in the Blue Mountains. One summer day, not long after serving houseguests lunch and bidding them goodbye, Maggie recorded the following experience: “I was sewing in the old house and we got a car load of company from Pennsylvania. We all went to the Beach for a drive [and] to show them around.” Of course, the Pennsylvania guests stayed overnight.

Hosting guests all summer (and at other times) was a tiring enterprise, but not without its joys. All of the children enjoyed meeting new families who came to visit them. Lela says, “It was a lot of work but [Mother] would get us all helping. . . . She seemed to be thrilled to meet all these people too, as we all were. We thought it was fun.” Becoming acquainted with the visiting families helped Maggie and her children feel more of a part of Ernie’s expanding circle of friends. Some of these friendships have continued to the third and fourth generations.

In the late fall and early winter months, newly-married Brethren in Christ couples sometimes chose the Swalm home as their honeymoon destination. In November, 1932, newlyweds Henry and Martha Ginder traveled north from Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, arriving unannounced at the Swalm farm. Other honeymooners included Jake and Jeannette Engle from Pennsylvania and Amor and Mary Herr from Ohio. To allow visiting honeymooners some privacy, Maggie would prepare a bedroom in the adjacent (now unused) old farmhouse, firing up the wood stove to create warmth.

Maggie unquestionably had the gift of hospitality. Paul Hostetler observes that Maggie was “very much at ease, no matter how full the house was with company. I never got the feeling that she was under much stress . . . she seemed to be in her element as a . . . hostess.” John and Nellie Hostetter and their children regularly drove from Clarence Center, New York, to stay in the Swalm home during Stayner Church’s love feast weekends. Daughter Winnie Hostetter Worman recalls that Maggie was “always cheerful” and “made us feel
The Swalm family hosting the Clarence and Ethel Boyer family at a roadside picnic in 1938. Left to right: Pearl Swalm, Mildred Swalm (Hawes), Ethel Boyer, Ernest Boyer, unknown woman, William Boyer, E. J. Swalm, Jean Swalm, John McLean (Isaac Swalm’s half brother), Lela Swalm (Hostetler), two unknown guests of the Boyer family, Ray Swalm, Maggie Swalm. Photograph by Clarence Boyer. The families were enroute to see the Dionne quintuplets in Callendar, Ontario.

The Swalm family at home in 1935. At back: Pearl Swalm (Ernie’s sister); middle: Ray, Ernie; front: Mildred, Jean, Maggie, Lela
so welcome.” She adds that Maggie had a high tolerance for the “silly actions of girls and boys.” Maggie even provided hospitality in her dreams. She once dreamt that so many unexpected guests arrived she didn’t know where to seat them all for dinner. In her dream, Maggie set up a long table down the main street of the town of Collingwood, complete with linen tablecloths and crystal (that she didn’t own).

A Hard Worker

Maggie Swalm was known as a hard but cheerful worker. Her children, in-laws, and grandchildren often heard Maggie merrily singing hymns as she worked in the kitchen or did chores in the barn. Mention has already been made of her industriousness in sewing and hosting guests. Maggie was also an expert at painting, hanging wallpaper, and small repair jobs. Jack Swalm, who did electrical work and other repairs for the Swalms, recalls that “Maggie was the mechanical one” of the family. Maggie stored her own set of tools in the kitchen and used them frequently. As houseguests, brothers J. Norman and Kenneth Hostetter observed that, in addition to being jovial, Maggie “was one of the hardest working women we remember.”

Some of Maggie’s work habits have become family lore. Every year, her children knew winter was over when Maggie ascended the stairs to begin several days of cleaning in the attic. “I well remember housecleaning starting in the attic with the old feather dusters, brushing all of the cobwebs away and sweeping up all of the flies,” Lela recounts. Although the children dreaded the work, they loved spending time in the attic, which Jean describes as a “treasure room,” with “trunks full of old things. . . . Mother saved everything ‘just in case.’”

A favorite task for Maggie was gardening. In May Maggie began to “dig some garden,” as she often wrote in her diaries. “Garden” for Maggie included a one-acre vegetable garden and several large flower gardens around the house. Dahlias and roses were her most prized flowers. In later years,
Jean says, "Whenever we’d get company at the last minute’s notice, Mother would head for the garden. It was more important for guests to see a clean garden than a clean house!"

As previously mentioned, during World War II, serving in his role as chair of The Historic Peace Churches, Ernie was away from home more than ever. At the same time, full-time farm help was not available because all young males were either in the military or doing alternate service. During these years, Maggie and Lela (now graduated from high school) did the bulk of the farm chores. Mornings were spent feeding the animals, milking, cleaning out the stables, and processing the milk. In the winter, the women delivered calves, ground grain, and hauled the cream can out the snow-filled lane to the parked car. Maggie neither complained about the hard work nor about Ernie’s seemingly non-ending CPHC meetings.37

Just as she did at home, Maggie worked hard at church, whether cooking for Bible conferences or cleaning the church. Jean describes an incident that was typical of Maggie. “At church cleaning Mother always seemed to pick the worst or dirtiest jobs like blackening the old wood stove in the sanctuary.” One time someone said, ‘You always like doing the stoves, don’t you Maggie?’” At first irritated, Maggie later chuckled as she relayed the comment to her family.

Family Finances

The Swalm family finances were always tight. Ernie’s role as a pastor of the Stayner Brethren in Christ Church was bi-vocational. That is, it was assumed that he would make his living as a farmer, not as a pastor. But Ernie’s true vocational calling and gifts were as an orator and church leader. His heart was not in farming.

Being a well-loved evangelist brought numerous invitations from churches, but little by way of remuneration. Lela notes that it was often the case that the “love offerings” given by congregations to Ernie were almost depleted in paying for his transportation to and from the location of the
meetings. When there was money remaining, it was a modest amount. Ray recalls, "If [Mother] ran out of money she'd say 'I'm strapped.' She often relied on the check from selling the cream to use towards household expenses. However, when Dad was home, he would often pick up the check and use it for other things, not realizing how much she relied upon it." When the children were young, Maggie kept her financial worries to herself. Lela says, "I was older before I realized the strain on the budget."

The Swalms had always raised some chickens for laying eggs and family eating. Beginning in the early 1940s, after consulting with family friend, Nellie Hostetter, they began to raise chickens to slaughter and sell. (Nellie, too, was married to a bi-vocational pastor [John] and housed her chickens in an addition to their parsonage's garage in Clarence Center, New York.) Every February for the following twenty years, boxes of 250 to 300 baby chicks arrived by train at the Collingwood station to be cared for by a variety of Swalm family partners. No matter who profited from the chicken business, however, Maggie always provided much of the labor.

Chicken slaughtering provided graphic memories for the Swalm grandchildren. Ray's daughter Louann remembers chilly days when Maggie showed her how to warm her hands inside freshly disemboweled chickens. Visiting grandchildren recall spending summer mornings sitting on a farm wagon, watching headless chickens run and flap around until they dropped.

Of the one-hundred-acre farm, Ernie most enjoyed the front ten-acre apple orchard. He took pride in pruning and grafting the trees as his father Isaac had before him. The apple orchard provided a significant, albeit seasonal, income for the family. (Lela notes, "I knew that we couldn't get new shoes until the apples were on.") For many years, the bulk of the Swalm apples were packed in large barrels and shipped overseas to England. During World War II, however, this reliable income came to a halt. Out of immediate necessity, the Swalms began selling apples door-to-door in Collingwood. This endeavor took considerably more time and was not
Maggie Swalm dressed for doing barn chores

Maggie (left) and Pearl processing chickens on the farm
enjoyed by the children who needed to do the peddling. Apple sales were also made to those who drove into the farm as a result of a roadside sign.

Another way that the Swalms raised money for the household was by selling produce, eggs, and baked goods in the nearby town of Collingwood and to summer tourists vacationing at Wasaga Beach. The latter kept Maggie particularly busy in the summer and early fall. When Pearl was living on the farm, both she and Maggie baked bread, cakes, pies, and tarts in large quantities to sell and, as the children got older, they were recruited into the cause.

When Maggie turned sixty-five she began receiving an income that was not directly linked to hard work. With her first old age pension check in hand, this gray-haired woman, who had struggled financially much of her adult life, immediately arranged for a ride to Collingwood where she opened her own Bank of Toronto account. Sometime during that year, however, the bank erroneously deposited Maggie's check in Ernie's account. In a spurt of independence, Maggie withdrew her money from the Bank of Toronto, marched across the street and opened an account at The Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce. From that day on, once their car was parked on the main street of Collingwood, Ernie and Maggie would walk in opposite directions to deposit their pension checks.

A Member of the Community

Visiting with people was a lifelong love of Maggie Steckley Swalm that began early. "When I was young I used to like to visit old people. . . . I often went to their homes [and] they had so many interesting things . . . that fascinated me. Sometimes I would go on a Saturday and stay all night and go to church with folks . . . on Sunday. This was always a treat to me."

As an adult, Maggie made friends easily. Just as her childhood home had been, the Swalm farm was located
several miles away from the nucleus of Stayner Brethren in Christ families. Although most of Maggie’s neighbors were Scottish Presbyterians, she quickly made their acquaintance. “Mother was often called upon to help deliver a baby or help with a sick family member or help to lay out someone who had died,” Ray remembers. “She always attended community weddings . . . and baby showers, and made sandwiches or cake to take.” Maggie had an ease with people that allowed her to be comfortable as the only plainly-dressed woman in the midst of Presbyterian women with last names such as McGillvary, McFadgen, Kelly, and McDermid.

The Swalms also socialized as a family with their neighbors. An April 9, 1931, entry in Pearl’s diary describes one such occasion: “Dick & Annie McKee came in eve. Had ice cream & cake. They stayed until nearly 12 o’clock.” Over twenty years later, Maggie recorded: “Went to a stainless steel [cookware] demonstration at McKee’s. Had a delicious supper.”

One of the Swalms’s Duntroon neighbors describes Maggie as having “a most pleasing personality,” noting that “she was always warm and friendly [and had] a good sense of humor.” Another neighbor, Ruth Elyea, has fond childhood memories of stopping by the Swalm farm house. She recalls that Maggie “always let us [children] in to visit and was glad to see us.”

The Women’s Institute of Ontario was established in 1897 to promote domestic science education for rural women. Women attending the Duntroon Ontario Institute meetings discussed homemaking skills such as sewing, cooking, and gardening. Many of the Stayner Brethren in Christ Church members would have judged such meetings to be too secular. Nonetheless, beginning as early as 1931 and continuing into the 1950s, Maggie “was invited to [Women’s Institute] meetings in the Duntroon area and she would go often. She loved it,” Lela recounts. “[The women] all seemed to really like her.”
Maggie and the Church

As previously described, the Brethren in Christ Church was an integral part of Maggie’s life from infancy on. As a member of the Stayner congregation, Maggie attended every church-related meeting she could, not only out of obligation, but because being there brought her great joy. For many years, Maggie led congregational singing from her regular pew at the left front of the sanctuary. (During those years, it was deemed inappropriate for a woman to stand in front of the congregation to lead music.) As a teenager, she had learned how to read musical notation at the singing school held in the Markham congregation. Years later, when new editions of *Spiritual Hymns* were published, Maggie was able to study the new hymns and gospel songs so she could teach them to the Stayner congregation.

Until the 1960s, prayer meetings were held in the homes of members. When hosting prayer meeting, benches needed to be carried in and set up. Long before the change occurred, Maggie was in favor of holding prayer meetings at the church. She frequently commented to family members, “Use the church. That’s what we have it for.”

As was expected of all church members, Maggie gave her testimony and prayed aloud in church on a regular basis. However, these were not activities that Maggie enjoyed. Lela believes that because of her shyness, Maggie did not care for testimony meetings. Her testimonies were always brief. “Often she would quote from a hymn or something. . . . But she didn’t ever give life experiences like a lot of [others] did.” Nobody, however, ever questioned Maggie Swalm’s devoutness.

Visiting evangelists and Bible conference speakers at the Stayner church always stayed at the Swalm house. The children particularly enjoyed listening to the evangelists’ stories every evening after church. “It is a wonder Mother didn’t make us go straight to bed,” Lela says. When the children finally were sent to bed, they sat out of sight on the stairs and continued to listen.
Having evangelists living with the family occasionally created delicate situations for Maggie and the children. Ernie Swalm purchased city newspapers on his train rides and brought them home so the children could enjoy the colored comic strips. One evening at Stayner church, when Ray was about nine years old, evangelist Henry Ginder preached against reading the comics. “The next morning after the sermon,” Lela recounts, “Henry was reading the farm journal we subscribed to and there were cartoons and jokes. Ray heard him laughing so he [stood] quietly behind his chair and [looked] over his shoulder. Henry caught on. . . .”

When Charlie Byers was the evangelist, he walked into the Swalm kitchen, allowing the door to slam shut after him, shattering its glass. He apologized to Maggie, who replied, “Oh, that’s O.K.” Ray quickly countered, in front of Byers, “You don’t say that to me, Mama.”

Recognizing that hosting guest preachers for extended periods took a toll on the Swalm family’s budget, the Stayner Council discussed whether the congregation should take an offering to offset some of their expenses. (A number of other Brethren in Christ congregations followed this practice.) Maggie always grinned when recounting (with a British accent) that Bill Rich, one of their former hired hands, stood and spoke against the offering, stating that “They’ll get their reward in Heaven.”

Although not as officially involved in church business as her husband, Maggie followed local and denomination-wide church issues with interest. Significant changes by the local church Council were duly recorded, such as the decision to allow an organ to be purchased. At the General Conference level, Maggie recorded that “Ernest Boyer spoke on Revivals and how to take care of converts.” Ten years later, Maggie sat in a Conference session “to hear the discussion on divorce.”
Mid-Century Changes

The Swalm family grew in numbers as first in-laws and then grandchildren were welcomed into the extended family. In 1949, Lela married Paul Hostetler, a Brethren in Christ minister from Ohio. Ray married Winnie Johnson from Saskatchewan in 1955 and Milly married Robert “Butch” Hawes from Niagara Falls in 1956. Jean Swalm did not marry and, following a time as Dean of Girls at Niagara Christian College, moved back to the farm and worked in the local area.

Following their marriage, Ray and Winnie made their home on the farm. Mirroring the older couple’s early years of marriage, Ray and Winnie lived in the same house with Ernie and Maggie. A substantive renovation process began on the older farm house where Isaac Swalm first lived. Three years and two babies later, Winnie, Ray, Louann, and Larry Swalm moved over to the “old” farmhouse. Winnie says that whether residing in the older Swalm house or beside it, “I never felt unwelcome. [Maggie] was always kind. Although she sometimes got impatient and she liked things done her way . . . it was never directed at me.”

Son-in-law Paul Hostetler recalls Maggie’s beauty and warmth, noting that she was “not only a beautiful person but also a beautiful soul.” When visiting at the farm, he observed about Maggie: “She was just obviously happy that I was there and [she] . . . always made me feel that I was very welcome.” Milly’s husband, Butch Hawes, liked to tease Maggie and was the frequent recipient of his mother-in-law’s pranks, such as the time Maggie sewed the tops of his work socks shut. It is easy to see why jokes about bad mothers-in-law have never resonated with Maggie’s in-laws.

In June of 1950, Maggie took an unprecedented month away from the farm to stay with Paul and Lela Hostetler in Clarence Center, New York. While waiting for the overdue first grandchild and following her birth, Maggie thoroughly cleaned the second story apartment and took over the everyday household tasks. Paul recalls, “She was just really nice to
have there. She didn’t want [Lela] to overwork, and she cheerfully did a lot of the work.” Maggie came for the births of all three Hostetler daughters.

When Maggie was at the Hawes’s home, she stayed up until after midnight to talk or play games with Milly, a notorious insomniac. Milly’s friends and neighbors looked forward to having coffee with Maggie when she visited, and especially enjoyed hearing her humorous stories and her colorful dreams. (At one point in her life, Maggie started keeping a pad and pencil beside her bed to record her dreams.)

Grandmother Extraordinaire

With her great love of children, her enjoyment of games, and her sense of humor, Maggie was a delightful grandmother. Ray and Winnie’s children, who lived next door, had a particularly close relationship with their Swalm grandparents. The oldest, Louann, liked to tag along as Maggie did her daily chores. Louann “helped” Maggie paper the floor of the chicken house, rake leaves, clean the attic, and bake pies. When Maggie paused to soak her aching feet, Louann’s little feet enjoyed a soaking, too.

Louann always wanted to drive along with Ernie and Maggie, no matter where they were going. By a very young age, she had attended a record number of funerals, ordinations, and other church meetings.

All of the grandchildren recall Grandma Swalm’s many tongue twisters, riddles, and word plays including, “A man has a sty in his eye and a pig in a sty. Does he have a pig in his eye?” Maggie patiently practiced tongue twisters with Lori Hawes until she could quickly repeat them back to her. Teddi Sue Swalm recalls Maggie’s large repertoire of memorized poems, including her dramatic rendition of “There Was an Old Lady all Skin and Bones,” which ended with a sudden loud scream.

Beth, Karen, and Helen Hostetler enjoyed summer weeks spent on the farm where they learned how to bring the cows to
the barn from the pasture and how to candle eggs. Maggie allowed them to roam the farm freely, including poking around in the dump and playing in the hay mow. Picking red raspberries and helping make large batches of jam and listening to Maggie’s stories about “the olden days” were other favorite activities.

Maggie found her match in game-playing endurance when Wayne Hawes and Larry Swalm grew old enough to play with her. Each child’s interests were tucked away in Maggie’s mind. For example, every note or letter that Maggie wrote to Lori Hawes included a picture or a poem about cats. Although the grandchildren loved to listen to Ernie’s endless supply of jokes, Maggie’s creative imitations of both animals and people never failed to make them laugh until the tears came.

Milly and Butch Hawes’s oldest daughter, Lynn, brought great joy and great sadness to the entire Swalm family. Tragedy struck when Lynn was diagnosed with leukemia. At first it seemed that a good remission from the cancer had become a cure. Sadly, when her immune system was suppressed by the chemotherapy, Lynn contracted chicken pox from which she never recovered. In 1965, having just turned six, Lynn died, leaving a painful hole in the family circle.

Remarkably, none of the grandchildren can recall being criticized by Maggie or Ernie. This is particularly significant when considering some of the extreme fashion styles of the 1960s and 1970s. Larry recalls sporting long hair and high platform shoes while the granddaughters were wearing mini-skirts and dabbling in makeup. No matter what their attire, Ernie and Maggie always proudly introduced their grandchildren to bishops and other church dignitaries.

Times of Grace and Sadness

With Ray and Winnie living full-time on the farm, Maggie, at the age of sixty, was able to travel with Ernie on his speaking trips. Maggie and Ernie were equally delighted with this change. In the summer of 1955, Maggie attended the
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Brethren in Christ General Conference in California for the first time. On the drive west, the Swalms and Hostetlers did some sightseeing. While in Las Vegas, Maggie noted that they “went through the gambling dens” where they saw “crowds streaming in and out.” Following the Conference, friends Eldon and Harriet Bert took the easterners to Knott’s Berry Farm. The day was completed with dinner at Clifton’s Restaurant in Los Angeles, which Maggie declared to be “a magnificent place.” A day later, in Sequoia National Park, Maggie was awed by the giant redwoods and by driving through “the highest mountains I had ever seen.”

In 1958 Pearl Swalm became seriously ill with cancer. Treatment was not successful and by early 1959, Maggie, with the help of visiting nurses, was caring for her sister-in-law at home. On March 8, Pearl Swalm died on the farm where she was born sixty years earlier.

Another significant change in the Swalms’ lives occurred in 1957 when the Brethren in Christ denomination restructured and appointed five full-time bishops to oversee all of its North American churches. Ernie was installed as bishop of the Canadian Conference and for the first time in his life began receiving a full-time salary. The appointment to this administrative position curtailed Ernie’s evangelistic speaking schedule considerably. He attended more meetings than ever, but they were of shorter duration and most were within driving distance of home.

One of the blessings of the bishop restructuring for Maggie was the advent of retreats for the bishops and their spouses. Prior to the annual Brethren in Christ General Conference, the couples would meet in a retreat setting. While the bishops discussed church business, their wives enjoyed each other’s company. On one such occasion, Maggie wrote that Martha Ginder, Ruth Byers, and she played “Scrabble, Chinese checkers, and Battleship, and went for a walk [where we] watched the birds and squirrels perform.”

During the years when Ernie was bishop of the Canadian Conference, Maggie gained more confidence in public settings. Although she never sought out speaking
opportunities, she spoke several times in connection with Conference meetings. Speaking events included giving the Canadian report at the Missionary Prayer meeting and serving on a ministers’ wives’ panel. Back at the Stayner church, Maggie gave post-Conference reports on “inspirational meetings” and once on Bishop Charlie Byers’s sermon on the space age.\(^{54}\)

A final highlight of the bishopric years was a 1967 trip to Europe. Ernie had traveled to Europe on his own three times, each time bringing home stories of the interesting people and countries there. This time, Maggie was thrilled to accompany him to the Mennonite World Conference in Amsterdam. Following the Conference, the Swalms and others toured Belgium, France, Switzerland, Lichtenstein, Austria, and Germany.

Ready for Change

Maggie Steckley Swalm dressed conservatively most of her life. Sometime after the mid-1950s, however, she made a significant wardrobe shift after noticing that the other (younger) bishops’ wives were no longer wearing “plain” cape dresses. Maggie quietly began sewing dresses with collars and buttoned bodices for herself. Within a few years, Maggie was also pinning simple brooches to her dress collars. Brooches were the first and only type of jewelry that Maggie owned, although Winnie Swalm speculates that although Maggie “never had a wedding ring, she probably would have loved to have one. She used to save the little plastic ring from a wedding favor [and] wear it on her finger for fun.”

Two incidents give further insight into Maggie’s attitude toward conservative dress. One hot, humid day, Ray, Winnie, Ernie, and the Swalm grandchildren were out under the big Manitoba maple tree, preparing to process freshly-slaughtered chickens. Shocking everyone present, Maggie (now in her late sixties) marched out of the house wearing a cotton house-dress from which she had cut out the sleeves. She declared, “If the
young girls can do it, so can I!” When Maggie was in her eighties, Milly Hawes introduced her mother to pantyhose. When wearing her first pair, Maggie slapped her knee as she proudly showed her granddaughters how she could now cross her legs without worrying about her garters showing.

Although Ernie Swalm was open-minded and even progressive in much of his thinking, he wanted Maggie to maintain her conservative hairstyle. All of her children believe that were it not for Ernie’s wishes, Maggie would have had her hair styled differently and would not have continued to wear a hair covering and bonnet. She certainly strongly supported the 1959 Stayner Church Council decision to allow female members to wear hats, “so that we might hold some of the young people.”

Maggie was seventy-two when Ernie retired as bishop in 1967. Although Ernie continued to schedule speaking engagements, his time at home increased significantly. During these years, Ernie relaxed more and the couple had time to genuinely enjoy each other’s company. Each morning, as part of their devotions together, Ernie and Maggie prayed for many people and ministries, but always included by name their children and grandchildren. Both took pleasure in playing word games such as the Reader’s Digest’s “Word Power” vocabulary quiz, and reading their mail.

Both Maggie’s eyesight and her increasingly arthritic legs precluded her personal favorites of quilting and gardening (although she recruited Jean and Ernie to plant a garden in her stead). As she spent more hours confined to her platform rocker, Maggie created other meaningful activities to fill her time. Maggie wrote to her granddaughter, “I am busy knitting these days, just granny squares for an afghan. I cannot see to do fine work. . . . I just don’t want to sit and twiddle my thumbs as some do.” (Maggie knitted nearly 100 afghans for shut-ins and family during the last decade of her life.)
Maggie and Ernie on their fortieth anniversary in 1960

The Swalm family in the mid-1940s. Lela, Jean, Maggie, Ernie, Ray, Pearl and Mildred
When in her eighties, Maggie's telephone became an instrument of ministry as she faithfully communicated with a number of lonely people, young and old, bringing them a dose of her cheerful, encouraging self. She tried to phone each Stayner church attendee on his or her birthday and more than once the surprised recipients heard her strong soprano voice singing “Happy Birthday to You!”

Maggie became a mentor to, among others, a mother of two young children, Jane Cubitt. Jane wrote to Maggie: “I often would ask you questions about raising children, for I longed for the advice and wisdom of someone whom I trusted and cared for. I believe God gave you to me to help me. You probably don’t realize how you have fulfilled Titus 2:3-5 for me. Truly you, Maggie, as an older woman, have been a teacher of good things. You have taught me more about loving my husband, Garth, and loving our children, Graham and Ian. You have helped me to understand the importance of the qualities Titus mentions in verse 5. I thank you.”

A highlight of Maggie’s later years was an annual trip to Camp Kahiquah for the Senior Citizens’ Retreat. She loved to perform at the retreat’s talent night, sometimes winning first prize. Her children were astonished to discover that, at the age of eighty-eight, she won a prize for playing the harmonica. (They didn’t even know she could play.) At another retreat, master of ceremonies Dorothy Sherk noted, “Bishop Swalm’s hobby is doing crossword puzzles.” She then asked him what dictionary he used as an authority. Ernie replied that he never used one. When Dorothy insisted that he must have relied on some authority, Maggie interjected, “Sometimes he asks me.”

In her late eighties, Maggie continued to keep young children spellbound with her tricks and stories. After Sunday church services, she sat in her front row pew waiting for the sanctuary to empty. But Maggie was never alone for long. Children and young people came to her to be teased and to exchange the latest jokes and riddles. As a seven-year-old, Heidi Van Den Hurk Smith developed a special bond with Maggie. Heidi notes that Maggie would catch her eye in church and then “lift her [four-pronged] cane just a bit and
turn the bottom up towards me to pretend she was shooting peas at me. . . .” Capturing Maggie’s appeal to children, Heidi writes, “Most adults interact with kids from an adult perspective but as a child I always felt like she was ‘one of us.’ . . . She was one of the only adults I knew that really understood what it was like to be a kid.”

Maggie Swalm was not perfect. Her primary flaws were impatience and fretting over large and small things, especially as she aged. The most underlined passages in Maggie’s Bible related to patience. Her occasional exasperation with her husband manifested itself in a strongly-worded “Ernie.” Jean describes a time when Maggie insisted that Jean make a favorite relish (mustard pickle) to preserve. Citing her own busy work and church schedule, Jean declined. Upon returning from work, however, Jean discovered both Maggie and Ernie out in the kitchen, with tears streaming down their faces from the onions they were chopping for the relish. Jean canned the mustard pickle.

Clearly, Maggie’s strong presence at home enabled Ernie’s long, successful public ministry. As Lucille Marr notes, Maggie Swalm, and women like her, “seemed to find meaning in their work and the ‘joy of service’ as they supported their husbands’ public ministry.” Maggie’s workload at home, however, did not preclude her own significant ministry of serving others. In fact, Maggie’s caring ministry grew as Ernie’s public ministry lessened.

Maggie Steckley Swalm never lost her zest for life. She was genuine in her declaration regarding her advancing age, that “the eighties are the greatest ever.” At the age of eighty-nine, after struggling for several months with cancer, Maggie died at home with Ernie, her children, her in-laws, and a few grandchildren at her side. After her funeral, while others ate refreshments indoors, some of the great-grandchildren were observed jumping and playing on the mound over her grave. Maggie would have been delighted.
NOTES

1 Maggie Steckley Swalm, interview by Beth Hostetler Mark, November, 1983. Unless otherwise indicated, quotations attributed to Maggie Swalm come from this interview.

2 The following people provided information for this biography through interviews or other forms of communication with the authors: Frances Johnson Bowles, Cora Steckley Cloke, Olivia Cober, Jane Cubitt, Karen Hostetler Deyhle, Ruth Swalm Elyea, Helen Hostetler Gruenewald, Lela Swalm Hostetler, Paul E. Hostetler, J. Norman Hostetter, Lori Hawes Hulet, Elsie Sheffer Purdy, Heidi Van Den Hurk Smith, Jack and Mary Swalm, Jean Swalm, Larry Swalm, Ray Swalm, Teddi Swalm, Winifred Johnson Swalm, and Winifred Hostetter Worman. Karen Hostetler Deyhle also provided assistance with revisions.


5 Evangelical Visitor, October 27, 1924, pp.13–14. When Peter Steckley was a child, Brethren in Christ congregations did not have Sunday schools.

6 Ibid., February 23, 1914, p. 22. E. Morris Sider describes the controversy over the doctrine of sanctification (also known as the holiness movement) in which Peter Steckley, Maggie’s father, was involved. As one of the ministers, Peter was an early advocate of holiness in the Markham congregation. His stance was criticized by “both the laity and the ministry” and for several years he was “given little opportunity to preach.” By 1911, however, Peter was elected bishop of his district. The Brethren in Christ in Canada, pp. 124–125. With this backdrop to Maggie’s early years, it is interesting to note her comment that she “went forward different times for sanctification but did not seem to grasp it.”

8 Ibid., p. 20. A fuller account of E.J. Swalm’s experience as a conscientious objector can be found in ibid., pp. 23–33.

9 As a young mother, Maggie sometimes paced the floor of the anteroom at the back of the Stayner church trying to get Ernie to shorten his sermons. However, as she later recounted, “He never paid any attention.” Winnie Swalm, e-mail, July 13, 2005. Although not profuse with her praise, Maggie would occasionally express pride in her husband’s sermons (through her diaries). For example: “We all went to Love Feast. Had a good meeting. Ernie spoke on 1st Cor. 11. I heard some comments on it. He gave the best interpretation I ever heard.” Maggie Swalm. Diaries, 1947–1965. Entry referenced here: April 27, 1957.

10 E. J. Swalm, "My Beloved Brethren...,” p. 42.

11 Between 1928 and 1934, while living with Ernie and Maggie, Pearl continued to serve as summer “tent worker,” accompanying a traveling evangelist who held evangelistic meetings in a large tent, typically close to an area Brethren in Christ church. Pearl Swalm. Diaries, 1931–1959. Entry referenced here, September 13, 1934.

12 E. J. Swalm, “My Beloved...,” p. 2; Pearl and Ernie’s Aunt Kate Swalm Saylor and her two children, who lived in Chicago, Illinois, were the only other close Swalm relatives. Conversation with Lela Swalm Hostetler, 2004.

13 For example, in an April 12, 1948 diary entry, Maggie noted: “Pearl’s cow had a calf.” Lela Hostetler noted that Pearl (financially) helped her begin a chicken-selling business.

14 Jean Swalm. Information from Jean Swalm is drawn from her written recollections, May, 2004, and an interview by Louann Swalm Walker, June 2004. Unless otherwise indicated, quotations attributed to Jean Swalm come from these two sources. Jean notes: “It often seemed to Mother that he paid more attention to Pearl” than to her.


16 Pearl Swalm Diary, March 1, 1933. In a rare departure from the norm, in the winter of 1933, Maggie, Milly (age three) and Ray (age one) accompanied Ernie for an eight-week revival meeting in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania. Although Maggie did have a respite from farm work, attending the nightly meetings with toddlers in tow
couldn’t have been very restful. Pearl and a friend cared for the older two children during this time.

18 E. J. Swalm, “My Beloved . . .,” p. 42. Many of Swalm’s meetings were three to four weeks in length.
19 Ray Swalm and Winnie Johnson Swalm, interview by Louann Swalm Walker, March 5, 2005. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from Ray and Winnie Swalm are from this interview. When asked whether Maggie was lonely during Ernie’s long absences, Maggie’s youngest sister, Cora Steckley Cloke, replied, “Well he went away to hold meetings!! So that was all right!” Cora Steckley Cloke, interview, May 23, 2004.
20 E. J. Swalm, “My Beloved . . .,” pp. 105–106. Swalm’s colleagues on the committee were J. B. Martin, a Mennonite, and Fred Haslam, a Friend. Other Mennonites who became close friends were J. Harold Sherk and Cornelius J. Rempel. The group of plainspoken men met with Canadian government representatives (including Prime Minister, William Lyon Mckenzie King) in Ottawa, Ontario, several times as they negotiated “for the establishment of the Alternate Service Work Camps.”
22 Informal conversation with Beth Mark.
23 Jack and Mary Swalm to authors, June 2004.
25 Ray and Winnie Swalm interview; Jean Swalm and Lela Hostetler recall Maggie’s contagious chuckle on such occasions. Most hired men or other houseguests took such tricks in good humor, but one hired man removed the yardstick in a fit of pique and allowed the glass to shatter.
26 Maggie Swalm diaries and Pearl Swalm diaries. Pearl Swalm sewed large quantities of prayer coverings and some dresses as a way of earning money.
27 Lucille Marr, “‘The Time for the Distaff and Spindle’: The Ontario Mennonite Women’s Sewing Circles and the Mennonite Central Committee,” Journal of Mennonite Studies (1999), pp. 130–151. We are indebted to Lucille Marr for providing the historical context for the significant role played by Mennonite and Brethren in Christ women and their Sewing Circles.
28 Ibid., p. 145.

Marr, “The Time . . .,” p. 137 and 130. Brethren in Christ historians have also given little attention to Sewing Circle. For example, E. Morris Sider does not identify Sewing Circle as a place where women could have an official leadership role. He states, “Official roles for women were non-existent, except as Sunday school teachers and as the spouses of deacons and ministers,” Canadian Portraits: Brethren in Christ Biographical Sketches (Nappanee, Ind.: Evangel Press and Canadian Conference, 2001), p. 9.

Maggie Swalm Diary, July 11, 1949.

E. Morris Sider to Beth Mark, June, 2005; Lela Swalm Hostetler, e-mail to Beth Mark, July 6, 2005.

Winifred Hostetter Swalm. E-mail to Beth Mark, August 19, 2005.

Elsie Sheffer Purdy, informal conversation with Beth Mark, April 17, 2005.

Jack and Mary Swalm interview; Paul Hostetler interview, September 2004.

J. Norman Hostetler, e-mail to Beth Mark, August 23, 2005.

Lela Swalm Hostetler, e-mail to Beth Mark, July 6, 2005.

Another small source of income for household expenses came from selling eggs.

The Swalm chicken venture was at first a partnership between Lela Swalm, who was earning money to attend Messiah College, and her Aunt Pearl Swalm. When Lela left for college, Maggie and Ernie took over the business until 1955. From 1955 to 1964, all of the farm, including the chickens, was a fifty-fifty division between Maggie and Ernie and Ray and Winnie Swalm.

Louann Swalm Walker, personal recollection; Karen Hostetler Deyhle, conversation with Beth Hostetler Mark.

Maggie Swalm Diary, September 20, 1955.

Jack and Mary Swalm, letter; Ruth Elyea, interview, June 26, 2004.


Pearl Swalm Diary, April 7, 1931.

Maggie rarely missed prayer meeting. On and before the day of Lela’s wedding, houseguests were plentiful, but water was in
short supply. Outside, it was uncomfortably hot. Under these conditions, Maggie cooked and baked for her houseguests and coordinated a reception meal at the farm for over seventy people. Several guests stayed overnight. Nonetheless, the day following the wedding, Maggie recorded in her diary: "We killed 22 chickens then fried one for dinner. . . . Milton Byers came for supper." Undeterred by heat or fatigue, Maggie continued: "We went to prayer meeting at Fannie Milne’s." Diary, August 18, 1949.

Lela Swalm Hostetler interviews; Sider, The Brethren in Christ in Canada, p. 121, citing Markham Quarterly Council Minutes, March 27, 1909, Article 4. In the early twentieth century, singing schools became popular among the Brethren in Christ, including the Markham congregation which, in 1909, "decided to have a singing school ‘through the summer or whenever convenient on account of the young people wanted to learn singing.’"

Lela Swalm Hostetler, e-mail to Beth Mark, July 6, 2005.

Ray and Winnie Swalm were both school teachers (Winnie was later a school principal). Mildred Swalm Hawes was a nurse and Butch was a postal worker and city bus driver. Jean worked as a sales clerk at Woolworth’s and later as a school secretary.

Information from Maggie’s grandchildren came from personal recollections of the authors, written recollections, interviews, and e-mails from all of the grandchildren.

Diary, June 6, 15, 1955.
Ibid., June 4, 1965.
Ibid., June 11, 16, 1965. In 1961, Ernie suffered a serious heart attack from which he mercifully recovered. The illness, however, did keep the Swalms from attending General Conference that year.
Ibid., December 28, 1959.
Ernie loved to describe the dramatic moment following Roy Sider’s installation as bishop when Maggie removed her own corsage and pinned it on Roy’s wife, Dorothy.
Maggie Swalm to Kenneth and Beth Hostetler Mark, October 19, 1978.
June Cubitt to Maggie Swalm, March, 1984. Titus 2:3–5: “Likewise, tell the older women to be reverent in behavior, not to be slanderers or slaves to drink; they are to teach what is good. So that
they may encourage the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, and to be self-controlled, chaste, good managers of the household, kind, being submissive to their husbands, so that the word of God may not be discredited" (NRSV).


60 Marr, Lucille, “Ontario Conference of Historic Peace Church Families and the ‘Joy of Service,’” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* (2001), p. 272. Marr adds, “. . . without women to provide the environment, the church leaders . . . would have been hard pressed to experience the joy they found in service.” E.J. Swalm is one of the church leaders referenced in Marr’s article.