

# MennoFolk

Mennonite & Amish Folk Traditions

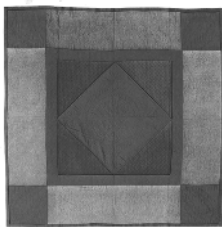


Ervin Beck

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Studies in  
Anabaptist and Mennonite History  
No. 43



# MennoFolk

Ervin Beck

Studies in  
Anabaptist and Mennonite  
History

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Ervin Beck



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*To the memory of Joel Edward Beck (1964-1973)  
and Sarah Elizabeth Beck (1970-1985),  
precious jewels.*

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# Contents

<i>Foreword</i> .....	13
<i>Preface</i> .....	17
1. Stories and Functions .....	25
2. Inter-Mennonite Ethnic Slurs .....	36
3. Origin Tales and Beliefs .....	53
4. Trickster Tales .....	76
5. The Reggie Jackson Urban Legend .....	96
6. CPS Protest Songs .....	123
7. Painting on Glass .....	149
8. Indiana Amish Family Records .....	172
9. The Relief Sale Festival .....	188
<i>Notes</i> .....	210
<i>Suggested Readings</i> .....	225
<i>Credits</i> .....	229
<i>The Author</i> .....	231

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# Foreword

Students of history have been latecomers to the study of folklore. Preferring to write about structures of formal power or cutting edge ideas, academics often neglected folklore—the unrecorded, often orally transmitted stories, songs, and customs that animate much of human life, even in modern and text-centered societies.

As early as 1846, Englishman William J. Thoms coined the term folklore to describe songs and legends that predated the printed page or never earned the right to be enshrined in print. For the next century, folklore remained the preserve of linguists and musicologists eager to uncover the primitive roots of what they believed was a progressively evolving human culture. Only in the 1940s did American historian Richard M. Dorson (1916-1981) begin to consider the possibilities of folklore for understanding how people lived and thought over time. For Dorson, folklore was not about catching the last glimpses of a quickly fading past, but about the vital core of any living community. Significantly, Dorson proposed that folklore could be an especially fruitful line of inquiry for understanding American immigrant and ethnic minority groups, whose distance from the centers of cultural power often limited historians' abilities to recover the depth and detail of their daily lives.

Following such pioneering leads, a few non-Mennonite scholars of Pennsylvania German folklore such as Alfred F. Shoemaker and Don Yoder, explored connections between

music, material culture, and the spiritual and intellectual worlds of Mennonite and Amish people. Meanwhile, “Russian” Mennonite storytellers and academics, including Doreen Klassen and Victor Carl Friesen, preserved and perpetuated Low German songs and proverbs.

Yet remarkably few Mennonites took folklore seriously. Perhaps their religious commitments led them to confuse fiction with the fictitious, unsure if truth could be found in jokes, legends, and tales. Perhaps the scholars among them saw folklore’s focus on the unsophisticated and the ordinary as incompatible with their desire for professional respectability and community acceptance.

Fortunately, Ervin Beck, a native of the Pettisville, Ohio, Mennonite community and a long-time professor of English at Goshen College, was not content to ignore the oral, traditional, and mundane elements of Mennonite life. Quietly and carefully he was gathering origin tales, interpreting urban legends, collecting reverse painting on glass, and analyzing ethnic festivals. *MennoFolk: Mennonite and Amish Folk Traditions* brings together new and newly revisited folklore studies from Beck’s years of research and consideration. His work is testimony not only to his scholarly care, but also to his devotion to the people whose cultural vitality he tapped. The results are a treasure for folklorists, but also for anyone who cares about the Mennonite experience, and especially for Mennonite historians concerned with questions of conduct, community, and conviction.

For a church whose understanding of faithfulness was expressed in daily choices and domestic routine, attention to folklore promises to yield insights into practical theology. Moreover, the orally and informally perpetuated aspects of folklife suggest new ways to understand the nature of community and the role of family in Mennonite and Amish history. And since folk culture is caught more than taught, it also illustrates the way in which Amish and Mennonites perpetuate tradition from generation to generation, illuminating a central task of religious people who must convince their children to continue in the faith.

The series *Studies in Anabaptist and Mennonite History* is pleased to offer *MennoFolk* as a contribution toward a deeper understanding of Mennonite peoplehood, past and present. Historians—and all who join the discussion of Mennonite life and faith—will only find their understanding enriched. May the conversation joined here, continue and flourish.

—*Steven M. Nolt, Series Editor*  
*Studies in Anabaptist and Mennonite History*  
*Goshen College, Goshen, Indiana*



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# Preface

After I coined the word *MennoFolk* for the title of this book, I discovered that it is also used by a group of Mennonite young people who have sponsored a summer music festival at Camp Friedenswald near Cassopolis, Michigan, and elsewhere in the U.S. and Canada. The newspaper article that announced the 2003 event emphasized “Mennonite-style singing with instrumentation styles from Cajun to Latin to Bluegrass to pop and Celtic.” The Mennofolk website ([www.mennofolk.org](http://www.mennofolk.org)) says that this “volunteer-driven movement” honors “the integral influence of folk music in the Mennonite church.”

My and their uses of the same word, *MennoFolk*, illustrate the complex and contradictory differences between the popular and the academic uses of the terms *folk* and *folklore*.

Mennofolk, the festival, clearly takes its inspiration from mainstream American culture, which reaches us through many commercialized channels of mass media—television, newspapers, films, recordings, websites. Folklorists regard such culture not as *folk culture* but as *popular culture*. And we further distinguish both of those spheres of culture from *academic culture*, which comes to us through authoritative channels—classrooms, textbooks, lectures, art galleries, concert halls.

In this scheme of things, *folk culture* is transmitted unself-consciously through informal channels within a particular community.<sup>1</sup> Through “oral tradition and customary example,” folklorists say. For verbal folk culture (stories, proverbs, songs),

“oral tradition” refers to the traditional knowledge that we learn through word-of-mouth communication in small groups—usually in conversational settings, seldom in stage performances. We learn it “by ear” and “by heart.” For material folk culture (art, gardens, costumes), “customary example” refers to what we learn by working next to a master and learning by imitation, often unselfconsciously so. In both verbal and material folk culture, the results are both predictable and creative, since the transmission will always be of “old” materials but with innovative elements.

A truly “Mennofolk” music program would consist of Old Order Amish singing their nearly 500-year-old hymns in their melismatic way. Or of Mennonites singing hymns and gospel songs in unaccompanied four-part harmony. Those are very distinctive folk musical traditions—surviving over many years, constantly evolving, and being passed on by customary example, rather than formal instruction or mass media.

If folklorists find little that is traditionally “Mennonite” in the music or the singing style or the stage performance in the Mennofolk music festival, they do see some elements of a latent, developing folk tradition.

First, the festival does invoke a community identity in claiming to be somehow “Mennonite,” and folklore normally is associated with a certain community, whether the community is based on ethnicity, age, occupation, gender, or religion. Second, the event is called a “festival,” which is a conventional folk expressive genre. If the festival is held often enough, and if Mennonites make up the performers and audience, it will eventually develop its own recognizable *folk traditions*, or predictable customs and patterns of behavior, which characterize folklore. Like the Mennonite relief sale discussed in chapter 9, if the festival succeeds in remaining relatively free from the control of churches and foundations, its official sponsors, it will become an expressive venue for the Mennonite young people—“the folk”—who keep it going.

*MennoFolk*, the book, intends to bring to the greater self-

awareness of Mennonites and interested non-Mennonites some traditional materials and behaviors among North American Mennonites that (1) have been learned by word of mouth or customary example, (2) have been transmitted to succeeding generations of Mennonites, (3) illustrate both long-established materials and creative variants of them and (4) express feelings, ideas, and values that are important for the individuals who pass them on in informal performance venues and for the community that unselfconsciously sponsors them. The book also occasionally considers folklore *about* Mennonites and Amish that is perpetuated by other groups.

The book assumes and attempts to show that Mennonites constitute a distinctive *folk group*. Alan Dundes' bottom-line definition of the term is "*any group of people whatsoever* who share at least one common factor," since "a group formed for whatever reason will have *some* traditions which it calls its own."<sup>2</sup> For Mennonites, that common element is a religious faith that descends from European Anabaptists in the sixteenth century. Although Mennonites are now a worldwide community—with churches that are native to Latin America, Africa, India, Indonesia and elsewhere—that one factor of religious faith unites them and makes up the boundary that distinguishes them from other groups. If they could be known, the oral traditions and customary behaviors directly related to all national or linguistic groups' expressions of Anabaptist faith would constitute "international Mennonite folklore." It is too early in the worldwide spread of Mennonitism to know exactly what that folklore consists of, although perhaps it has been evident at past Mennonite World Conferences and will become further known through the Global Mennonite History Project.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, each national and linguistic group of Mennonites represents a different *cultural* embodiment of Anabaptism and therefore cultivates a distinctive local Mennonite folklore. Each of such groups probably also constitutes a separate *ethnic group* in their sociological context. What makes Mennonites an ethnic group will be discussed further in chapter 2. Suffice it to say here