

Goodall-Moyer-Comfort Family Collection

XR1 MS A512

By Ben Robinson

“The Goodall-Moyer-Comfort Family Collection” chronicles over one hundred and fifty years of the family’s history in Lincoln, County, Ontario. The collection was given to the University of Guelph Archives and Special Collections by Leanne Goodall in 1998 and is comprised largely of various memoirs and accounts, World War II correspondence, and sermons. A variety of property records, will and testaments, and account books are included as well.

The Moyer family, originally Mennonites from Switzerland, settled in Vineland, Lincoln County, Ontario in 1800 after Samuel T. Moyer (1797-1874) made the journey north from Pennsylvania with his parents.¹ Seventeen families made the journey to the new colony in 1800.² This migration was motivated by the land’s accessibility and fertility³ but also reflected the typical desires of Mennonites at the time. Canada offered order and liberty, the freedom to follow religious convictions and, most importantly, the promise of conflict exemption.⁴

Although unclear, it is likely that Samuel T. Moyer was related to Jacob Moyer Sr. and his son Dilman Moyer, two men who were influential in the creation of Lincoln

¹ C. Francis Moyer, “The Old Farm,” Moyer-Comfort-Goodall Family Collection, XR1 MS A512, Box 1, File 1, p.1 Archival and Special Collections, University of Guelph Library.

² L.J. Burkholder, *A Brief History of the Mennonites in Ontario* (Toronto: Livingstone Press, 1935), 43.

³ *ibid*, 16.

⁴ *ibid*, 22-23.

County's first Mennonite churches.⁵ Dilman Moyer conducted sermons from the Moyer Church as early as 1848⁶ which started on the Moyer homestead at Vineland.⁷

The Moyer and Comfort families united with the marriage of Lottie May Moyer (1880-1972) and Ellwood Comfort (1879-1950) in 1902. Their daughter, Elva Comfort (1905-1978), married C. Francis Moyer (1903-1988) in 1928. Though the two families were both originally of Mennonite descent, the majority of the collection's content concerns this period after 1900 when most of the family was no longer connected with the Mennonite faith. Though not explicitly accounted for in the collection, the families' decision to break from the Mennonite faith may be partially explained by the actions of many Mennonites in the 19th century who were active in attempts to reform the church or establish new branches upon settlement.⁸ In 1848 the struggle for identity manifested itself in Lincoln County when a conflict between ministers Daniel Hoch and Dilman Moyer caused a division of followers which ultimately undermined much of the church's spiritual leadership.⁹ The gaining momentum of the Mennonite Brethren in Christ movement, which reached its peak in 1889, also affected membership.¹⁰ In effect, the "Goodall-Moyer-Comfort Family Collection" is not a record of Mennonite immigrants, as its archival description states, but the record of a family with visible Mennonite heritage.

⁵ *ibid*, 45.

⁶ Laureen Harder, *Their Richest Inheritance: A Celebration of the First Mennonite Church Vineland, Ontario 1801-2001* (Vineland: The First Mennonite Church, 2001), 21.

⁷ "The Old Farm," 6.

⁸ Harder, 21.

⁹ Burkholder, 46.

¹⁰ William F. Rannie, *Lincoln: The Story of an Ontario Town* (Lincoln: W.F. Rannie – Publisher, 1974), 168.

The collection's value may be seen through the many themes that establish themselves. Much can be learned from its intimate descriptions and observations of farm life and practices, changing landscapes and traditions, rural and urban negotiation, and the impact of war on family circles. As well the collection has great merit as a grand narrative capable of entertaining and enlightening.

Description of the Collection and its Value

Memoirs and Personal Accounts:

Memoirs form the foundation of the "Goodall-Moyer-Comfort Family Collection." The account of C. Francis Moyer, entitled "The Old Farm", recounts a boyhood spent on the Moyer homestead on Cherry Avenue in Vineland, Lincoln County. C. Francis' detailed depictions of this rural community in Lincoln County in the 1910's and 1920's pays great attention to the social patterns of family and neighbours. He discusses the surplus of "Sam Moyers" at the time and the nicknames that were meant to straighten them out but, upon reflection, quips, "I sometimes wonder if Hog Sam and Butter Sam were not one and the same person, and also an ancestor."¹¹ His observations, written late in his life, are those of a boy keen to understand, and learn from, his elders.

C. Francis supplies us with honest depictions of the Moyer family's day-to-day mixed-farming operations. He discusses the continuous temptations of fruit farming and cash crops that were prevalent in the Niagara Region after World War I.¹² He concedes that "all the activities of the farm were subject to a slow, gradual change or evolution."¹³ The traditional farm practices described by C. Francis, such as trucking produce over

¹¹ "The Old Farm," 7.

¹² *ibid*, 45.

¹³ *ibid*, 40.

great distances, would be replaced by the new distribution arrangements of marketing boards after World War II.¹⁴ C. Francis' memories reflect the inevitability of progression felt in this transitional period.

"The Old Farm" touches on his father Levi Moyer's (b.1864) move from the Mennonite faith to the Baptist Church. His decision was motivated, we are told, not by religious conviction, but by an attraction to Maggie Mae Claus, a practicing Baptist and his future wife.¹⁵ Levi Moyer's move to the Baptist Church was probably not uncommon at the time. Historically, there has been a significant transfer of memberships between the two sects due to shared theological compatibility.¹⁶ C. Francis notes that his father may have chosen to become a Baptist but "he never lost respect for the Mennonites, or they for him."¹⁷ It is unfortunate that C. Francis is unable to offer more in this regard for he admits regret that he didn't ask his parents more about their formative years.¹⁸

Lottie May Comfort addresses Mennonite heritage in her "Memoirs of Lottie May Comfort, 1880-1972." Her recollections document an individual slowly moving away from the Mennonite Order. Her father, Allen Moyer, had already begun this process¹⁹ but her marriage to the progressive Ellwood in 1902 drastically affected her values. Lottie May states: "I learned many things from my husband—music appreciation and correct speaking among them...I can understand now why he hadn't wanted to go to my church

¹⁴ Rannie, 76-77.

¹⁵ "The Old Farm," 5.

¹⁶ Abe J. Dueck, "Baptists and Mennonite Brethren in Canada," in *Mennonites and Baptists: A Continuing Conversation*, ed. Paul Toews (Winnipeg: Kindred Press, 1993), 190.

¹⁷ "The Old Farm," 17.

¹⁸ *ibid*, 12.

¹⁹ Lottie May Comfort, "Memoirs of Lottie May Comfort 1880-1974," XR1 MS A512, Box 1, File 2, p.1, Archival and Special Collections, University of Guelph Library.

with me. It must have seemed very narrow to him. I got away from my own ideas gradually and as I look back I realize my ideas on religion have changed considerably.”²⁰

Lottie May’s observations are helpful in understanding the motivations involved in a natural transition away from the Mennonite faith. Her experiences show that the process is not solely a conscious one.

Ralph Comfort (1908-1992), a son of Ellwood and Lottie May Comfort, is a prominent figure in the collection’s memoirs. His richly detailed writings devote great space to descriptions of chores, farm equipment and practice, family relations, rural education, community, and leisure.

“I Remember” presents Ralph Comfort’s memories of growing up as a boy in Saskatoon in the 1910’s and later, in the 1920’s, as a young man in Gainsboro Township, Lincoln County. Rural education and the relationship between farm life and urban relocation are themes that spread through Ralph’s accounts. Ralph’s father Ellwood attempted to balance the life of a school principal with that of a farmer and often the family had to relocate for short periods of time to accommodate school. Ralph recollects the challenges of this negotiation stating that:

Since he taught school full time most of the [farm renovations were] done by him and his boys, as well as all the farm work, on weekends and holidays....In spite of Dad’s salary, the sale of a few pigs, cream, eggs and chickens, money was always in short supply. The building program, food, clothes, school fees, etc. etc. drained

²⁰ *ibid*, 19.

the finances continually. I know that Mother worried at times about unpaid grocery bills.²¹

Ralph's account shows that the relationship between the responsibilities of farm work and the necessity of education was an ever-present concern.

"I Remember" outlines a young Ralph Comfort's ascent from youth to manhood. The patterns of day-to-day life and responsibility in Saskatoon and Lincoln County are reflected through cyclical and complimentary descriptions of work, school, family relations, and leisure activity. It is difficult to decipher work from simple joys, as seen in a vivid memory of cutting corn. Ralph writes that, "There were four of us that day [sic] we each took two rows at a time and off we went. Half way down the row one person got a little bit ahead so the rest of us worked a little faster to catch up. It soon ended in a race to see who could finish his row first."²² Ralph's memoir reveals the layers of rural life as busy and complex, but also manageable.

The theme of change permeates the collection, most specifically in "A Motor Trip to Western Canada and California 1937" by Lottie May and Ralph Comfort. The trip exhibits the ambitious spirit of the family, which Ralph estimates absorbed ten percent of their yearly income²³, and depicts a North America staggering in its grandeur and, in the case of the Canadian prairies, suffering significantly from drought. Many of the people

²¹ Ralph Comfort, "The Story of Ellwood and Lottie May Comfort," Moyer-Comfort-Goodall Family Collection, XR1 MS A512, Box 1, File 5, p.10, Archival and Special Collections, University of Guelph Library.

²² Ralph Comfort, "Memoirs of Ralph Comfort," Moyer-Comfort-Goodall Family Collection, XR1 MS A512, Box 1, File 3, p.32, Archival and Special Collections, University of Guelph Library.

²³ Ralph Comfort and Lottie May Comfort, "A Motor Trip to Western Canada and California 1937," Moyer-Comfort-Goodall Family Collection, XR1 MS A512, Box 1, File 4, p.40, Archival and Special Collections, University of Guelph Library.

the Comforts visit in Saskatchewan are old neighbours and family acquaintances. The pointed quality of Lottie May's daily journal entries supplies images of farmers who are willing to deal with hardship. Lottie May seems to share their acceptance writing matter-of-factly that:

Eva and Will are the same, cheerful as ever, but no crop, garden drying out and everything bare and windswept. This country looks terrible absolutely nothing, unless rain comes and then it would only save the feed and help the gardens, too late for any grain. Back to Kate's for overnight.²⁴

The family's experience in America is quite different. Their observations of Oregon and California communicate awestruck admiration for an American west committed to progress and growth.

C. Francis Moyer's World War II Correspondence:

World War II correspondence between C. Francis Moyer and his family covering the years 1942-1945 is afforded substantial space in the collection. The correspondence includes the original letters to his wife Elva and children, as well as "My Daddy's War," a memoir written by C. Francis' daughter Helen Goodall (the mother of collection donator Leanne Goodall), that presents selected portions of these letters alongside her own personal recollections.

The correspondence demonstrates just how effective and valued letters were for those overseas wishing to maintain a connection with the homefront. Not receiving return

²⁴ "A Motor Trip to Western Canada and California 1937," 8.

letters deeply impacted a soldier's morale.²⁵ C. Francis reflects this dependence in statements to Elva such as, "You absolutely don't deserve a letter today but I had some fun, and must tell you about it." He ends the letter by writing, "The mail is in, out [sic] there is no letter from you today, so I won't have to bother writing to you. Love always, Francis."²⁶ The frustrations of war are secondary, however, to the main sentiments of the letters which are the assurance of love, descriptions of the unit's repetitive tasks, and the desire to be home.

A particularly intriguing item of the collection is a letter to Prime Minister Borden from Mennonite minister S.F. Coffman requesting confirmation of Mennonite exemption from World War I. Despite a legal basis for Mennonite exemption from combat, Canadian society did exhibit a certain level of hostility towards their limited involvement.²⁷ Unfortunately, it is not clear from the collection exactly whom this letter pertains to as the family had, by this time, moved from the Mennonite Church. C. Francis himself had become a member of the United Church.

Property Papers, Will and Testaments, Account Books, and Miscellany:

Part of the collection is consists of such items as mortgages and land transfers, auction records, pocket books, and account books. The property papers include land requisitions, appraisals, mortgages, deeds, and diagrams, most of which concern Samuel

²⁵ Audrey Grescoe and Paul Grescoe, eds. *The Book of War Letters: 100 Years of Private Canadian Correspondence* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Ltd., 2003), 8.

²⁶ C. Francis Moyer, "C. Francis Moyer to Elva Comfort, May 2, 1945," Moyer-Comfort-Goodall Family Collection, XR1 MS A512, Box 4, File 6, Archival and Special Collections, University of Guelph Library.

²⁷ Joe Mihevc, *The Canadian Mennonite Experience of World War I* (Toronto: Saint Michael's College, 1986), 93.

T. Moyer's Vineland farm property on Lot 5, Concession 2 in Clinton Township, Lincoln County (there are, however, land papers of extended family as well). These records track the progression of the Moyer property's ownership and land use. As well, the items document the property's transfer from Levi Moyer to C. Francis' older brother, Ira Moyer.

The will and testaments manage to span different generations and are intriguing for what their author's deem necessary for inclusion. Aside from formal bequeaths of land, finances, and livestock, the value of family is evident. The will of Samuel T. Moyer, dated 1874, asks that his daughter, "while single shall be entitled to live with her mother during so long as she continues my widow."²⁸ The will of Robert Comfort Sr., dated 1867, reinforces this notion requesting that his son Robert Comfort Jr., "...shall furnish my said wife Jane Comfort a sufficient quantity of good fire wood, fitted for her use, during her natural life, And [sic] shall also carry to the mill and get ground all the grain the said Jane Comfort shall require for her use..."²⁹ That such intimate requests are made adds greatly to the character of the documents and extends the limits of a will and testament's practical purposes.

The Limitations of the Collection

Though the "Goodall-Moyer-Comfort Family Collection" offers much that is insightful and valuable, it does have its limitations. The memoirs are photocopies of the original typed documents. This takes away from the collection's exclusivity since

²⁸ Samuel T. Moyer, "Will of Samuel T. Moyer," Moyer-Comfort-Goodall Family Collection, XR1 MS A512, Box 5, File 21, Archival and Special Collections, University of Guelph Library.

²⁹ Robert Comfort Sr., "Will of Robert Comfort Sr. 1847," Moyer-Comfort-Goodall Family Collection, XR1 MS A512, Box 1, File 8, Archival and Special Collections, University of Guelph Library.

numerous copies could exist. More importantly, much of the memoirs utilize alteration or appropriation. “A Motor Trip to Western Canada and California 1937” makes use of Lottie May’s diary, which she kept on the trip, but Ralph has reshaped her account, picking and choosing which of her entries to present in entirety while adding his own, supplementary memories. For example, his mother’s original diary entry for July 4, 1937 indicates that they went swimming in the Souris River but, rather than continue with her account uninterrupted, Ralph intervenes, stating, “the dip in the Souris was not very inviting as the water was a green mess of algae.”³⁰ We are not able to determine whether this opinion was shared by his mother because the account is not provided.

C. Francis Moyer’s memoir “The Old Farm” suffers a similar problem. The first page alerts our attention to the fact that the account is based on his notes. Because C. Francis’ original notes are not included it is difficult to tell to what extent Jean Blumgold, who is acknowledged for her help in making the memoir possible, has determined the narrative’s style and contents. Similarly, “Memoirs of Lottie May Comfort 1880-1972” was written by Elva Comfort as dictated from her mother. That these two works utilized the efforts of others makes them subject to some skepticism.

The collection’s greatest omissions are the personal diaries of Ellwood and Lottie May which were kept for most of their adult lives. The inclusion of these diaries would have been valuable for their contemporary observations of the Grey Cup, the space program and recreational activities.³¹ Ironically, Ralph notes that, “Dad’s diary is interesting for what is omitted as well as for what he records.”³² He mentions how he

³⁰ “A Motor Trip to Western Canada and California 1937,” 3.

³¹ “The Story of Ellwood and Lottie May Comfort,” 15.

³² *ibid*, 15.

tried to summarize the diaries but encountered great difficulty.”³³ Ralph tells us that his brother Maurice, “the keeper of the family records,” has these diaries as well as the one kept by Lottie May during the motor trip.³⁴ The inclusion of these documents would have increased the collection’s comprehensiveness.

One final limitation of the collection is the amount of weight given to the sermons C. Francis’ delivered as a minister for the United Church after 1963. His work in this role comprises almost forty percent of the collection. In a sense, these sermons form the basis of a separate collection.

Conclusion

The various memoirs, World War II correspondence, and other records supply important insights on farm life and practices, changing landscapes and traditions, rural and urban negotiation, and the impact of war on family circles. As a whole, the “Goodall-Moyer-Comfort Family Collection” is a useful gathering of documents, both as a primary research source and as a celebration of the family’s life and times in Lincoln County, Ontario.

³³ *ibid*, 14.

³⁴ “A Motor Trip to Western Canada and California, 1937,” preface.

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