

Most of us living in the United States know little about our genealogy. We can name our grandparents and where they grew up but often we're stumped when asked for the names of great-grandparents and so on. Some Americans have had this information forced away from them. African Americans had the knowledge of their ancestral line taken from them as they were kidnaped from their families in Africa and sold apart from each other as slaves in the U.S. For white Americans though, it seems to be more of an intentional forgetfulness. We continue to try to collectively forget white Americans' responsibility for slavery, the killing of and stealing from Native Americans as well as the many covert ways that white Americans have forced our continued reign of power upon this country. To support this collective memory loss, it is most important that we have no recollection of any personal or family responsibility for these atrocities. And so, we forget our family past. Even for those who have an interest in genealogy, names are relatively safe. They tell little of the individuals' actions and choices.

Ethnic Mennonites may know more about their family histories than the average American. I think that our history seems relatively benign to us. We have interpreted our history as one of surviving and overcoming persecution as our ancestors made treks around Europe and then to America. We understand our lives here as the continued effort to remain separate from the dominant culture. We have not imagined ourselves as a part of that culture even though we receive the advantages of the culture.

I grew up in upstate New York and belong to a small ethnic Mennonite community in Lewis County. In 1987, the Lewis County Conservative Mennonite Churches published *Strangers and Pilgrims: History of Lewis County Mennonites* by Arlene Yousey. My parents bought copies for each of us kids, and I enjoyed reading the brief biographies on close relatives as well as finding genealogical information, but I read little of the early history available in this book until recently. Almost all of us ethnic Mennonites born in upstate New York are descended from one couple, Michael and Anna Zehr, who emigrated from Lorraine, France in 1833. I'm directly descended from this couple through both sides of my family. Very few people's personal histories could be more wrapped up in one couple than mine is in them.

One of my colleagues, Lawrence Hart, has a much different personal history than I do. He is a Cheyenne Peace Chief and Mennonite pastor. Like most white Americans, I don't know enough of Native American history to write much of what Hart's ancestors endured. I have learned that the Cheyenne tribe has a tradition of peace chiefs who work toward solving conflicts in peaceful ways. Black Kettle and White Antelope were two of those chiefs and had worked at building relationships with the U.S. government and army. In 1864, Major Edward Wynkoop, commander of Fort Lyon, invited Black Kettle and White Antelope to move their camp close to Wynkoop's garrison, for protection. Instead, on November 29, several hundred soldiers attacked the camp. Black Kettle tried to talk to the soldiers and even raised an American flag. This did not stop them. U.S. Lieutenant James Connor rode through the massacre site the next day. He wrote, "I did not see a body of man, woman, or child but was scalped, and in many instances their bodies were mutilated in the most horrible manner" (Wilson 274). The rest I don't have the stomach to repeat. This is only part of Hart's personal history.

In order for white Americans to gain ownership of land in North America on which to build the comfortable lifestyle that we have in this country, Native Americans had the land taken from them through forced relocation and murder. James Wilson, in the prologue to his book *The Earth Shall Weep: A History of Native America*, writes "Like the glaciers which gouged out a new landscape at the start of the Ice Age, the European invasion of America over the last four hundred years has utterly transformed the world in which native people live...The relentless tide of settlement has uprooted whole nations and deposited them thousands of miles from their homelands." He continues later, "As well as losing most of the land on which their aboriginal way of life depended, generations of Native Americans have been traumatized by a sustained assault on their social, psychological and spiritual world..."(Wilson xxv). In the midst of the Indian Wars that finally forced Native Americans onto reservations, Army General Otis issued an order to military troops in the frontier to collect human remains of Native Americans. Over a two-decade period thousands of remains were collected and shipped to Washington, D.C. for scientific study. Now it is time for long overdue reparation.

In 2002 at a Mennonite Central Committee meeting, Lawrence Hart spoke to those present about the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). This act requires all museums and depositories that have received government aid to return all of the Native American remains they are holding to Native American Tribes. The human remains that can be identified to belong to a particular tribe have been returned. Many of the human remains cannot be identified though. The NAGPRA Review Committee, of which Hart is a member, is working at ways that these estimated 100,000 culturally unidentifiable Native American human remains can be collected and buried. Much land will need to be purchased and many small coffins—since only the craniums of these bodies remain—will need to be made.

I am still shocked by the number of Native American remains that have been sitting in museums around the country and what that says about the number of native people who have been slaughtered in this country. But for me, what has been most revealing is what I read when I returned home from that meeting. I returned to *Strangers and Pilgrims*. I read that Michael and Anna Zehr had originally planned to move to Ohio but at some point changed their minds. Instead, after disembarking in New York City, they traveled north to an area that old maps had titled "Dismal Wilderness" and "Deer Hunting Grounds of the Five Nations." Though I have also been guilty of calling this harsh, cold land names like "dismal wilderness," it was of enough use to the five Iroquois nations to be recognized by the map makers. Another map made a commentary on the area and speaking of its snowy mountain, stated, "although this one unfavorable circumstance has hitherto secured it from the jaws of the harpy land jobbers, yet, no doubt it is as fertile as the land on the east side of the lake, and will in future furnish a comfortable retreat for many industrious families" (Yousey 32). My ancestors were some of those families. Though they may not have been unscrupulous land dealers, we cannot ignore how it was made possible for white Americans to gain access to this retreat.

Michael and Anna heard of this land from Joseph Keiffer, another Amish Mennonite from Lorraine, France who had crossed the ocean several times in search of settlers. Land in this region was selling very cheap: \$1.50 to \$3.00 per acre. Of the land that the Zehr family settled, Yousey writes, "Within their purchase on the north end of the French Settlement lay a small

clearing where an Indian hut stood and here the family lived until they could build a log cabin" (Yousey 34). There in print was the proof of my family's invasion of Native American land. What happened to the original family who cleared this land and built this hut? Did they come home from a day working in the woods to find others living in their house? Had they already been forced from that land? I wonder what the Zehr family thought about this. Did they consider the people who had lived there? It seems that they thought no more about it than any other white people settling new areas in America. I wish my ancestors had been different.

I own no land. I rent a thin rowhome in a crowded city. But truthfully it is probably someone like me who has gained more from the land than those farming it now. Family farms are hard work and many are struggling. My cousins and I, and many other professional Mennonites like us, have parents or grandparents who were able to pay for educations through the success of a family farm and move onto professional jobs before the farm experienced the financial difficulties that some of them struggle with today. Most of us have benefitted because Europeans forcibly took land that belonged to Native Americans.

There is no longer a way for me to lie to myself. I cannot pretend that my ancestors bought land for a fair price. I cannot pretend that they chose a location that Native Americans did not want or had not settled. I cannot pretend that the violence done towards Native Americans did not benefit me. I can't avoid the question: what can I do about the killings that happened generations ago and the land that was taken long before I was born?

I have often felt that there was nothing that could be done, and that justified me just sitting around feeling guilty. Even though Lawrence Hart's and my personal histories are quite different, they are united in the history of this country and our paths have crossed now. He and I share the same Anabaptist faith. We share the belief that Jesus condemns violence. Jesus calls us to repent of our sins. He calls for a peaceful justice for those who have been violated. We hear sometimes of a calling for restitutions to African Americans and Native Americans for the work and land they have given to the financial advancement of this country from which they were not paid and have not benefitted. This is not close to the scale of that, but I believe Lawrence Hart has offered me a very small way that I can start making restitutions, a small way to repent of my sins. It is not that history can be changed, but I now have an opportunity to honestly express my deep sorrow for the violence done to Native Americans that profited my ancestors and me. I will help pay for land and will assist as I can in the making of caskets so that these native people have the long-awaited proper burial that my ancestors had upon their deaths. This will not be a joyous process. This is not a time to pat myself on the back for being an enlightened, caring and giving person. There is no goodness in what I am doing in the same way that there is no goodness in me paying a fine for a law I might have broken. This is just the very beginning of paying back a large debt that I owe. It is the very beginning of connecting with the grief of those who have endured generations of mistreatment and genocide while my family has been blessed with generations of freedom and opportunity. With this opening offered to me to begin a process of restitution, there are no more excuses. If I do nothing now, what does that say of my guilt and sorrow? What does it say of the Mennonite church?