

Rolling Down Black Stockings



A Passage Out of the Old Order Mennonite Religion

Esther Royer Ayers

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Frontis: Sarah (left) and Esther taken at “White Barn” farm the summer of 1940.
Photo taken by Alta Royer (1907–1940), my father’s first cousin.

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I dedicate this book to the ten grandchildren of my mother, Fannie Rebecca Rhodes Royer. She gave you the opportunity to choose. Choose well.

Michaele Annette (Royer Teston) Caravello
Brenda Grace (Burke) Jackson
Sharon Rose (Burke) Yost
Shirley Ann (Burke) Coburn
Donald Marcus Miller
James Robert Ayers Jr.
Donald Lewis Ayers
Franklin Walter Royer
Cynthia Jane (Royer) Oaks
Kevin John Royer

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How many times I wished I could have been a block of ice, for then I could have melted when I felt different, could have been water.

Water . . . where it is impossible to pick one droplet from another. Only then would I no longer feel different.

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To my husband, James: Little did you know a walk into a bathroom could be a walk into my heart. Your intelligence and industriousness provided me with exposure to the way people lived outside of the Old Order Mennonite community. Thanks for giving me the means and time so I could sort out my thoughts and come to an awareness.

To my mother: Thanks for throwing your hands up in the air and settling for nothing but PEACE.

To my father: Thank you for choosing such a meaningful funeral song.

To my sons, Jim and Don: Thanks for listening with rapt attention when I rocked you and told you my stories.

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Introduction

My father, Walter Elias Royer, did not come from a Mennonite family. Rather, his family owned a farm within the Mennonite community near Columbiana, Ohio. While in their teens, my father and his only brother, Russell, began associating with Mennonite girls. They attended social functions at the Leetonia Mennonite Church, a “New” order of Mennonites, and then joined that church.

During this time, my mother, Fannie Rhodes, lived less than a mile from my father’s farm. She was raised as a strict Old Order Mennonite and had joined the church of her parents, the Pleasant View Old Order Mennonite Church, as a teen.

Although my parents had been neighbors, it wasn’t until my mother picked strawberries at the Royer farm that my father became interested in her. “He liked the way I worked,” she laughed modestly, “then invited me to care for his ill mother.” In her humble way, she never added that they fell in love, but that’s what happened.

In 1928, after she began dating my father, my mother left the Pleasant View Old Order Mennonite (OOM) Church and joined the Midway Mennonite Church—a “sister” to the Leetonia Mennonite Church. Members of the New Mennonite churches didn’t wear black bonnets or black stockings. They wore dresses with collars and decorative buttons and wore heavy brown cotton stockings.

My mother was not born in Ohio but in Dayton, Virginia. In 1913 her parents moved to Ohio for economic reasons. The family came by train and purchased a small farm on Germantown Road. They operated a successful chicken hatchery and were generally content with their lot in life.

In 1929 an Old Order Mennonite bishop made a ruling that rocked the Pleasant View church community. Some members of the congregation wanted cars instead of horses and buggies and petitioned the bishop to allow this change. He agreed but ruled that car owners must paint all the chrome black. These automobiles became known as “black-bumpered” cars.

My maternal grandparents felt owning cars was wrong, even with black bumpers. In 1929 the family sold their farm and business and returned to Virginia where the church still required the horse and buggy be used for transportation.

My mother, now twenty-three, liked my father and was happy with the New Mennonite way of religion so stayed behind and continued to work and live in my father’s home. Unfortunately, life often throws water on the brightest of fires. Before long she developed goiter (an enlargement of the thyroid gland) and was forced to join her parents in Virginia. While there, she underwent surgery and spent the next couple of years in the care of her mother (my maternal grandmother).

During her recuperation, my father wrote letters and visited my mother. Then in 1931 he drove to Virginia, married her, and together they returned to Ohio. They purchased a rather new bungalow on Germantown Road, which became my childhood home.

Something happened while my mother recuperated in Virginia that drastically affected my parents’ marriage. At some time while there, she rejoined the Old Order Mennonite church in Dayton (ironically named Pleasant View Old Order Mennonite Church as well).

Relatives have told me that, when my parents married, my mother promised my father she would join him in attending his church—the Leetonia Mennonite Church. Further, she promised she would raise their children in the New Mennonite ways. This is not what happened. My mother brought up her children as Old Order Mennonites.

My mother, who prized truthfulness, must have agonized greatly about abandoning such a promise to my father. I surmise two situations that might have caused her to do so.

(1) I learned that her mother (my maternal grandmother) wrote many “strong” letters during the early years of my parents’ marriage. These letters caused friction between my mother and father. I can only imagine the letters must have been full of Old Order doctrine and the need to return

to that religion. Undoubtedly, my mother was still recovering from her thyroid illness and subsequent surgery at this time—and words picked precisely to inflict mental pressure would have filled the letters.

(2) When my parents married, my father already walked with a limp. I'm sure his deteriorating physical condition concerned her greatly. She had to know that harsh years lay ahead and might even have felt God was punishing her for stepping out of the Old Order religion.

I have not used accurate names of individuals except for my brothers and sisters, my husband, and my children. Although I put quotation marks around conversations, naturally, I cannot remember them verbatim. Throughout the book, however, I have consistently portrayed the truth as I recall it.

I still go back into the Old Order Mennonite communities, where I have many relatives. Not wanting to bring any hardship upon them, I did not interview any of them in order to enhance my childhood memories. However, I felt free to tap into the memory banks of my brothers and sisters and pull out their resources, which has been of considerable help to me.

Some of our common memories passed quickly by our eyes; some are so tightly embroidered into the fabric of our memories that pulling on a thread tugs the heart; and some are so vivid that they return as full color images, frozen exactly as they happened.

I begin my book in the fall of 1946. I am eight years old and can no longer ignore the threatening black clouds that hang over our house.

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BOOK ONE



My Old Order

Mennonite Childhood

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I Feeling Different

As soon as I walked into the kitchen, I knew I was in trouble. That look of disappointment written across my mother's face cut into my heart like a knife. She wiped her brow and mouth with her faded apron then allowed it to fall over her long, gathered, full skirt.

Sarah, the messenger of my misdeed, stood by Mama's side. No wonder she had rushed off the school bus as it stopped in front of our modest, burnt-red mock brick shingled bungalow. Her dark brown hair, disarranged because of her haste, still maintained some semblance of a middle part, as required by Old Order Mennonites. Her frazzled braids, as thick as ropes, fell across each shoulder and onto the bodice of her green-and-white checked gingham dress.

As she hurried into the house, my two youngest brothers ran out to greet us. There were eight of us children born within ten years: Marcus, thirteen at the time, was the oldest; then came four girls (Grace, Ruth, Sarah, and me); and finally, my three younger brothers (Frank, John, and Paul). As already our custom, we didn't hug, kiss, or even talk much. We just kicked up stones lying on the graveled Germantown Road, one mile west of the small town of Columbiana in the northeast quadrant of Ohio. Then slowly we walked to the front porch, where we took turns on the swing.

The crispness of the late September day begged our youthful spirits to loiter and enjoy ourselves for a while. We tarried as long as we dared, until our conscience got the better of us, then crossed the threshold into a world filled with late afternoon and evening chores.

My mother's pained look as I entered the kitchen told me that Sarah had seen my misdeed, that I had not kept it quite as hidden as I'd thought.

“You know I’ll have to spank you,” Mama said, her long sleeves rolled up to just above her elbows for kitchen work. Her full, faded apron nearly covered an equally faded, collarless, homemade, dark-print cotton dress—a long dress that revealed tiny ankles and a hint of legs to support her thin, small frame. Her legs were modestly sheathed in long black cotton stockings that ended in plain black laced shoes.

I nodded. I might sin in some ways, but I refused to lie. I knew I’d be spanked if Mama ever learned that I had rolled down my black stockings during the flag salutation ceremony. Indeed, the sheer white covering she wore over her hair attested that she was a member of the Old Order Mennonite religion, and, as such, had promised God she’d raise good children that would someday follow her in the religion.

I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the republic for which it stands, one nation . . . I knew the words to this pledge, yet was not allowed to participate in this morning ritual.

“When your classmates stand and salute the flag, you must remain seated,” my mother instructed when I first attended school.

And later, she added, “Old Order Mennonites are not allowed to salute the flag. We do not pay our allegiance to worldly governments. Our allegiance is to God and heaven.”

Noting my discomfort with this rule, at times she added, “Esther May, it’s very difficult being different, but you must remember that we are just pilgrims passing through this world. We keep our eyes focused on heaven. Our reward comes after we die. Someday we’ll live in a place where there will be much joy and happiness. When you keep your eyes fixed upon this goal, it’s easier to obey.”

Indeed, Mama, I wanted to say. Do you know how difficult it is being different in a classroom when you’re eight years old? You attended Germantown School in a one-room class filled with other Old Order children. If I asked, could you recite the pledge of allegiance? Did you even have a flag in your classroom?

But in an Old Order Mennonite family, children cannot ask such questions. It is of utmost importance that they obey their parents and the rules of the church.



Sarah and I shared the third-grade classroom because she had failed the previous year. It was better for me when I had no tattletale sister watching my every move. Today, as usual, I rolled down my stockings when my classmates stood to salute the flag. I forgot to roll them up until later, even after the pledge had ended and my classmates rejoined me at my lower, seated level.

Remaining seated during the flag ceremony didn't seem to bother Sarah. She concentrated on obeying Mama, which meant obeying the religion as well. Perhaps, being a year older, she felt she had rightfully acquired a certain matriarchal responsibility and took on the awesome position as guardian of my soul.

Having Sarah, so sweet and full of laughter, as custodian of my soul should have filled me with gratitude. Perhaps she urged me to be obedient so that we could continue our childhood games in heaven someday. Play house in heaven with our little teacups and saucers. She could serve me mud pies and I would pretend to eat them. Laughing. We would laugh together. What fun we would have!

And fun we did have when we played together. We'd share girlish giggles as higher and higher on the swing we'd go, our long skirts blowing in the air. What fun to play hide-and-seek, kick-the-can, and who's-got-the-button with her. Such joy I felt at home where we all dressed alike, behaved alike. But oh, those agonizing days at school!

My mother glanced my way: "Go upstairs first and change into your everyday dress."

I wanted to say, Spank me now, Mama. Let's get this over with. But I knew such a response would get me in deeper trouble.

I ran up the stairs to the girls' bedroom, which occupied one complete side of the upper floor of our bungalow. The boys' bedroom mirrored ours on the opposite side. A hall and a small storage room separated the two rooms.

Two double beds with straw-filled tick mattresses, a mammoth maple bureau, and a mirrored oak dresser with crystal knobs met the furniture needs of four growing girls. Doors on each side of the room opened into large closets. These closets ran the width of the bedroom and stood there like bookends, as if it was their job to keep our bedroom upright.

Because of my dawdling, it took me an unusually long time to change into my everyday dress. On my way downstairs I sat on the hard wooden steps to plan my next move. How could I get out of my impending spanking?

The spacing of the carved wooden banisters comfortably accommodated my cranium. And from this vantage point I could see our parlor, the only room in our home perpetually clean and tidy, a room reserved for company.

The room, off-limits to playing children, seemed mischievously inviting with its soft, peachy cream cabbage roses chasing jade ivy leaves along the border of the dusty-pink linoleum. My eyes rested on the top of a walnut bookcase, where a tiny working spinning wheel not much larger than my hand was displayed. When I dusted this tiny wooden marvel, I could make the wheel turn and the spindle twist by tapping my fingers on the treadle.

I shifted my eyes to a tiny dresser. It had a hinged mirror about the size of a quarter. Each drawer had a center wooden knob, round as a marble. I could open a drawer by pulling the knob. It rolled as if on wheels.

Other magical tiny pieces displayed around the room joined large pieces of functional furniture, such as an oak library table, several oak rocking chairs, and a walnut bookcase. All this furniture had been deftly crafted by my father when he worked as a carpenter.

But my father no longer worked as a carpenter. His fingers no longer obeyed commands from his brain.

Then I noticed the marble-topped mahogany table with ornate carved legs. A huge family Bible sat on top of this table. The table and the Bible had belonged to my paternal grandmother, who had died the year Sarah was born.

The Bible with gold-edged pages had wonderful black-and-white drawings throughout. These drawings depicted different biblical events and were protected with the sheerest of paper.

Knowing how much Papa treasured this Bible, we'd carefully leaf through the pages to view the drawings. We'd skip the text, for we couldn't understand what it said anyway. Our favorite page was the one that had the date of Mama and Papa's marriage and the birthday and weight of each of us eight children carefully written in ink.

I felt that enough time had now passed for me to safely enter the kitchen. There, eleven-year-old Grace shelled lima beans for supper.

“Where’s Mama?” I asked, afraid of the answer.

“She’s feeding the chickens.”

“Want some help?”

Grace eyed me curiously, then brushed curly, straw-colored ringlets of hair from her pale face. Mama said her paleness meant she didn’t have enough iron in her system, and that she needed to eat more liver.

My offer, an aberration from my usual disappearing act whenever work awaited me, didn’t throw my mild-mannered, mild-tempered sister into a state of shock. Wise Grace, with her bright blue eyes and heart-shaped lips, said, “Sure,” then handed me an enameled pan large enough to contain a bushel of shelled beans. I sat on the long wooden bench with my work on the kitchen table and began shelling.

Soon Mama entered the house with a basket of eggs. The curved wide brim on her black bonnet hid her gaunt face from my view. But I watched her every move. Surely she had forgotten that I needed a spanking. And wouldn’t she forgive me when she saw how nicely I helped Grace? But no such luck befell me.

“Come on outside,” she said as she grabbed the dreaded whip, its body flexing like that of a long black snake. “We may as well get this over with.”

Why outside? I wondered. But, with the basket of eggs, the dishes, and the pan of shelled beans in plain sight, why risk sending all scattering to the floor? And why expose Grace’s fragile ears to my squealing? It made sense to go where the chickens, the pigs, the horses, and the cows squeal, yak, ninny, and moo all the time. Let them compete for my air space.

Mama seized my arm and drew back on the whip. I began to run around before she got in one lick. I circled quickly as she became my Maypole—around so fast that very few of her intended strokes actually struck me. Maybe some hit my legs or my back, but I barely felt anything. “Whew!” she said, stepping back, trying to catch her balance. Breathless, she told me to be a good girl.

Since I did not consider what I had done bad, my mother’s spankings did nothing to change my behavior. Lying, stealing, and hitting or

fighting with my siblings were sins, but I didn't do those things. Nevertheless, because I was sure it hurt her deeply to spank me, I resolved to be more careful next time.

How I longed to be like the other girls in my class! I admired their trendy fashion, their pretty white socks tucked into freshly polished and laced saddle shoes, their brightly colored, flowered dresses with pretty buttons on the bodice, lace-trimmed collars, skirts starched just enough to move gently, gracefully, keeping perfect pace with their legs as they strolled down sidewalks—skirts short enough to bare the knees, short enough to tempt air currents to expose lace-trimmed satin panties.

My drab blue dress bloomed with small pink flowers so tiny it would have taken a magnifying glass to find them. Snaps held the front of my dress together since our church banned buttons. Long sleeves were required, long skirts as well. My skirt was so long it would've taken a tornado to lift it high enough to expose my panties. And, oh, did I hope no one ever saw my homemade bloomers made of muslin sackcloth!

Although my plain dress and long braids made me quite different from my classmates, my black stockings troubled me the most. Rolling them down and exposing my bare legs made me feel like one of them. However, even a tiny spider in the corner of the classroom would have scratched his head and loudly proclaimed: Black stockings rolled down to the ankles is definitely different!

If my classmates ever noticed my odd behavior, I was unaware of it.