

Feeding the Hungry

by Carolyn Beachy

It was 1949. Vernon Ropp, 15, from Kalona, Iowa, picked up several sheets of newspaper and carefully wrapped them around the two quart glass jar of canned beef. Then, he packed it in the wooden barrel with the other jars of delicious meat. His parents were on the MCC meat canning committee, so he had to help with this project. However, he didn't mind. Lots of people were cheerfully working in this team effort. The Mennonite church from Kalona was fulfilling a mission



– that of helping hungry people devastated by World War II. Kalona was a place of comfort and plenty. Why shouldn't they share with those less fortunate?

Now, fifty-six years later, MCC, a household name among Mennonites, still does meat canning to alleviate hunger. With increased technology, their methods have changed, but their call remains the same. That call comes from Jesus in Matthew 25, where He clearly outlined that righteous people will be compassionate, giving meat to the hungry,

drink to the thirsty, shelter to the stranger, clothes to the naked, and support to the prisoner. Also, Menno Simons drew attention to Jesus' words in his writings, reminding Christians that, "True evangelical faith cannot lie sleeping..."

In 1920, thirteen church leaders, moved by this call, started Mennonite Central Committee in Elkhart,

Indiana. Their original concern was hunger in the former Soviet Union. After World War II, they added the meat canning project to their growing agenda. The program has remained alive and well.

MCC meat canning continued in Kalona until approximately 1980. It operated from individual homes and then from Prairie Dale School, purchased specifically for meat canning and other food processing projects. Once a year, MCC drove their portable canner to Kalona, and local farmers donated animals, custom butchered them, and organized workers to help process the meat for shipping. Federal regulations became more stringent however, and the decision was made to discontinue. Prairie Dale School was sold.

Vernon Ropp didn't forget about the meat canning experience of his youth. It taught him a lifestyle of giving, and he took advantage of many service opportunities over the years. In 2000, the central MCC board, of which Vernon is a long time member, encouraged Vernon to bring MCC meat canning back to Kalona. Vernon, with his broad range of experience, contacted ministers to explore and promote local support, organized a committee, assigned responsibilities, procured a location, and scheduled a date through MCC headquarters in Akron, PA, for their canning truck to arrive in Kalona. He recruited volunteers and solicited donations through letters, literature, and press releases. He had the water tested thirty days in advance. The groundwork was laid.

For six years now, the event has happened at Helmuth Repair near Kalona. Owned by Floyd Helmuth, pastor of Sunnyside Mennonite Church, it is an ideal place because of its size and Floyd's power washing equipment. Regional USDA federal inspectors are notified by MCC headquarters of the dates for the meat canning. They grant Vernon a license to operate, and come to oversee the entire project.

A day before the canning, MCC drivers bring the semi-truck canning unit, a small factory on wheels that is computerized to monitor all procedures. They pull up next to the large building opening, open the semi's side doors, lay down a ramp to connect the truck to the

building and enclose the connection with plastic. By now, Vernon has purchased a disinfectant, which is used to wash down all ceilings, walls, and floors. He has also purchased thousands of pounds of fresh turkey, ready to can and prevalent in Kalona. It is meat everyone in the world will eat.

At 4 A.M. the next day, volunteers show up clean and healthy, don caps and form assembly lines. The meat is ground coarsely into large stainless steel kettles, then transferred to stainless steel vats to bring the meat from 28 degrees F, its temperature at purchase time, up to 50 degrees F. Then the meat is put by hand into one-quart cans. The cans are weighed, sealed, and put into two "cradles," each holding 140 cans, to pressure cook for two hours and ten minutes to a temperature of 242 degrees F. After cooking, the cans are cooled, hand



washed, dried, and labeled. Labeling is accomplished by applying glue with a paintbrush to the label and attaching it to the can. After the date, time, location, and code are marked on the lids, the cans are packed, 24 to a box, for shipping. This production continues late into the night. One year, the youth worked all night in what was called "Midnight Madness".

Many different churches, including the Amish, come together for this common cause. Women of the community provide meals, and the local bank donates fresh fruit for snacks. About 120 volunteers come and go, working their shift, creating camaraderie that includes even the inspector. One year, he commented, "In 44 years of meat inspection, I've never been so impressed, seeing so many churches work together." Volunteers have commented, "Why don't we do this more often? This is the first time we've worked together like this."

In 2000, 4,460 pounds of meat were processed in one day of production. By 2004, that amount increased to 12,250 pounds in two days of production, almost tripling the original amount. Donations, given in response to the canning committee's letter and to press releases, have more than covered costs. It has been a

win-win situation. That kind of success keeps Vernon going.

Then last year, another phenomenal experience convinced him that the SE Iowa MCC meat canning project is worth it. Vernon spent 14 days traveling with other MCC

warehouse managers in southeast Europe. In Bosnia, Croatia, and Serbia, Vernon was privileged to visit refugee camps and talk to the people there. He heard their stories of the war. He observed their needs. He distributed clothing and health kits. He experienced their gracious hospitality in the midst of poverty.

One day at an MCC partner warehouse, he noticed a box. Written on the box was "Batch 37". Could it be? Excitedly, Vernon pulled out a can. On the lid was the Kalona code! Vernon could tell it was from the second batch on the second day of canning. He was moved to tears. The fruit of his labor was right before his eyes. He and the director of the warehouse stopped and gave a heartfelt prayer of praise. "I've seen the beginning. Now, I've seen the end," Vernon said.

The MCC meat canning season is from October through April. The canning unit brings its opportunity to 34 locations in the U.S.A. and Canada. MCC has canned a total of 857,941 pounds of mostly turkey, with smaller amounts of beef and pork. They present a unique opportunity to bless and in turn, be blessed. Vernon Ropp knows that from personal experience. **BB**

* For more information on MCC meat canning, log on to www.mcc.org.



Carolyn Beachy lives in Kalona, IA, with her husband, Landon. They are the parents of four grown children. Carolyn says she is not doing much these days but having fun, and that includes writing now and then.