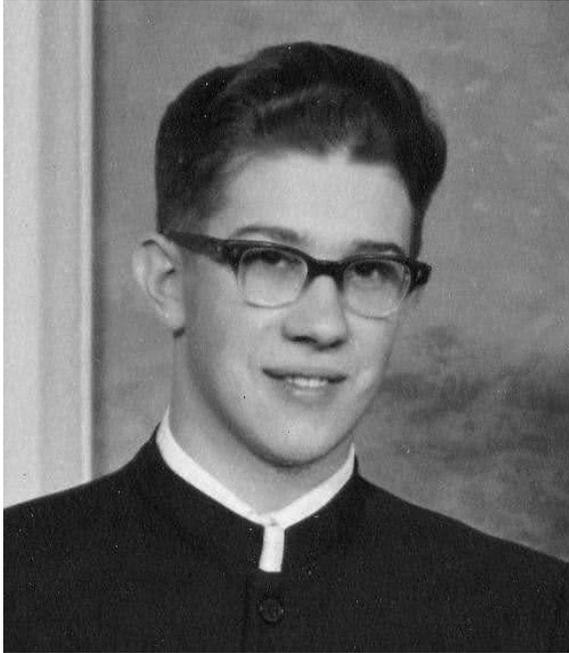


# Gallery

## "Regulation" Plain Coats

Richard as EMC Student, c. 1965  
From a family portrait



J. C. Wenger, c. 1961  
From the flyleaf of his monograph,  
*Mennonites in Indiana and Michigan*

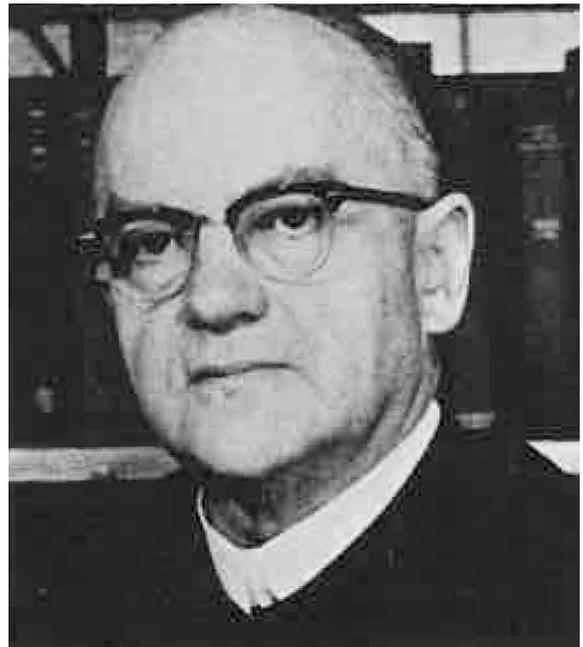


Richard as an Oxford student, 1972  
The "Edwardian Walking Suit"



## Adaptations

J. C. Wenger, c. 1977  
From the last page of his monograph,  
*How Mennonites Came to Be*



# My Edwardian Plain Suit

by Richard Showalter

I've never worn a tie. A necktie, that is.

It's nothing extraordinary, of course. Many Mennonites never have. It all started with---but never mind the history (Melvin Gingerich and Herald Press recently teamed up to explore that subject in book-length. Browse in it sometime.)

You asked me to be personal?

I wish I could remember the time I first noticed my parents were different. Like any other child, I must have assumed their peculiarities to be inevitable corollaries of their superiority in other ways.

I remember the "whose-dad-is-strongest?" debates with childhood chums---but I was always limited to the hypothetical. "If my father would fight, he could eat beat your dad up!" (Their dads were veterans of World War II, and we were still assailing "dirty Japs" in 1954.)

Later, during my middle teens childhood naivete was replaced by a strong dose of adolescent idealism and I zealously promoted the "real reasons" for Mennonite distinctiveness. Christians are naturally different, I argued. It was a premise so clearcut as to be indisputable. Every-

(cont'd on PAGE TWO)

("Edwardian Plain Suit"--from PAGE ONE)

thing in my experience pointed to its truth.

But I became restless with an inconsistency. In the Kentucky hills we wore blue jeans to church, and the symbol of male Mennonitism---the plain-suit---although good in theory, wasn't practical for poverty-level living. How should I be different? Long sleeves and buttoned-up shirt collars?

I know! Striped overalls! Father doesn't wear ordinary dark blue overalls with long, complicated hooks. He stops in Harrisonburg once every few years for a new supply of striped light blue overalls with hooks that don't wear out. (Harrisonburg is also where you get plain suits --at Martin's store.) Brother Alvin wears striped overalls, too. There must be a reason. They're like an everyday plain suit.

So I ordered striped overalls. And I told my parents why.

For the first time in my life, I got the feeling somebody thought I was slightly fanatical. I'll never forget the look my parents exchanged; it became a touchstone of my emotional history---never, before or since, had I quite the same sense that my parents feared they had taught me too well.

For two years I wore overalls.

Then I was a high school senior and it was time to buy a suit, a plain suit. There was of course never any question about its cut. All the men I admired most wore plain suits. It was a mark of discipline. I continued the practice of dressing up only for the rarest of occasions, however. For after having noted my parents' reaction to my overalls theory, I had decided that the highest consistency for the Christian lay not in wearing a plain suit, but rather in refusing to spend any money for dress-up.

Ten years ago, that was. It was later that I moved to Harrisonburg from the hills, and still later that I matriculated at EMC. I discovered in the process that many of my notions on ties and overalls weren't socially or intellectually acceptable. Peasant values don't wear well in institutions dedicated to the elite tradition of the liberal arts.

So I budged---and for a couple years dallied with a sport coat. (Definitions: sport coat---a fatal first step toward going all the way; necktie---a later step going all the way.)

But I never made it (all the way). Theoretically, maybe. Practically, no. For I never forgot the overalls, and about the time I graduated from college I became aware of the American middle class. It was skepticism at first sight. I didn't want to join---symbolically or otherwise.

For a whole year I searched for an alternative. I knew what I wanted---a "jacket suit." Dressy enough to identify with my brotherhood without the nuisance of being dubbed a cleric.

So last spring when Jewel and I walked into a Chicago shop and saw an "Edwardian walking suit" on sale (nobody else was buying), it was love at first sight. A plain suit with a collar. It was all me, and my only fear was that the middle class would co-opt it!

Well, they haven't yet. And if you're tempted to think of this confession as anachronistic for the 70's, I won't mind. Just remember that if you scratch me, I'm still half Mennonite, and half Amish.

The J. C. Wengers  
1410 S. Eighth Street  
Goshen, Indiana 46526



Mr Richard A. Showalter  
Assistant to the President  
EASTERN MENNONITE COLLEGE  
Harrisonburg VA 22801

June 20, 1972

Beloved Brother Richard:

Do you have a copyright on that special jacket which you wear -- a coat, yet one with a stand-up collar? I like it very much, and would like to get one similar to yours. Where does one go for a coat like that? Can you get it in a dark grey? I'd deeply appreciate a reply. Greetings to Jewell, the Anabaptist!

In Christ,



Eastern Mennonite College Harrisonburg, Va. 22801 / 703 433-2771 Office of the President

June 26, 1972

J. C. Wenger  
1410 S. Eighth Street  
Goshen, Indiana 46526

Dear Brother,

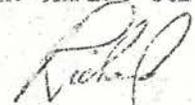
No, I do not have a copyright on the coat I wear! I'll tell you where I bought it, though I'm not positive they can still be purchased there. The name of the shop is Broadstreet's, and it is located right beside the Palmer House on State Street in downtown Chicago. You'll have no difficulty finding the place.

When we first found them, I was almost at the point of asking Jewel to make one of this design; then on Lincoln's Birthday, Spring, 1970, we happened to be shopping on State Street and noticed a Lincoln's Birthday sale at Broadstreet's. We walked in, and to our amazement, found exactly what I had been looking for--and at ridiculously low prices. They were clearing out their stock.

I hope you are successful in your search for something similar, and I will inform you if I discover any other out-of-the-way places where they can be purchased. I feel confident that there are such places, though I haven't shopped recently.

Jewel and I are planning to attend the Mansfield Summer Institute in biblical studies at the University of Oxford, England, July 8-30. We will leave the first of next week. We will have several free weekends, both in England and on the Continent. What would you do with your weekends if you were me, and could spend them in England?

In Christ our Lord,

  
Richard A. Showalter