

Verna M Gingerich (1919-2021)



Matron at Conservative Mennonite Bible School (Currently RBC) 1955-1965

Verna Gingerich played a significant role in the early years of the conference Bible School at Berlin, Ohio and followed it to Rosedale, Ohio for the two years preceding completion of the first women's dormitory. As the College matured, it stopped appointing a *matron* (mother) for female students, but in the years that she served, Verna's role was critical and deeply appreciated. Her importance is signaled by her inclusion as a member of the faculty, both in lists and in photos, though she generally taught no classes. The 40th anniversary history of RBC, *We Beheld His Glory*, reports that Verna "became a Berlin legend." (Page 22)

Mail for students at Berlin was delivered to Matron Verna, who would place it into boxes arranged by last names. Other tasks delegated to her included serving as private counselor for the young women, granting (and tracking) permissions for female students to go on dates, and maintaining records of weekly reports submitted by local hosts for each student. She was also responsible to assign students to a range of duties related to serving food, clearing tables, and washing dishes.

Whoever carries as much authority as Verna did over the personal details of student's lives could easily be widely resented, but Verna must have interacted with sufficient grace and cheer to be widely appreciated instead. The 1961 *Gospel Star* (yearbook) was dedicated to Verna in appreciation for her "unfailing faithfulness," "inexhaustible energy" and "the motherly atmosphere" she provided. Here are some other *Gospel Star* tributes:

1963. Verna is described as a "Sun Flower" originally from Kansas, and praised as "quite valuable to both the welfare of the Bible School and to each individual student. . . . She knows the happiness received by doing the Lord's will."

1964. "Her energetic walk, radiant smile, and fervent spirit makes [sic] her appear younger than she really is."

1965. “When she was first asked to be matron of the Bible School, her first thought was, ‘I can never fill Mrs. Shem Peachey’s place.’ But this is not what was asked. She had her own place to fill, and fill it she has. A thousand and one extra things necessary to keep the school functioning well have been hers to accomplish.”

An anecdote preserved in the RBC history concerns the first year the School moved from Berlin to Rosedale. Verna and the dietitian Lizzie Yoder moved with the school for the winter weeks it was in operation, and they stayed at a local residence. Apparently the heat from the wood stove in the house was a precious resource, because after Verna and Lizzie would retire to their room for the night, the father of the family would place a rug in front of their door to preserve the heat for the rest of the house! (page 81)

“In the late 1940’s Verna, Elizabeth and other young Amish ladies, worked at the Asplin Basket Factory in Hartville. At their noon break the girls would sing together. In the summers of 1952-1954, Verna and her sisters [Elizabeth, Betty Marie, Anna] traveled from state to state with Andrew Jantzi to sing in his tent meetings. The four sisters memorized 100 songs and were widely known as ‘The Gingerich Sisters.’” (Verna’s online obituary)

*The only recordings in the archives of the Gingerich Sisters are digital and faulty. If anyone has a tape or vinyl recording, the archives would love to gain access and create a better digital record. This track of **The Cleansing Stream** has been doctored by AI to remove the noise, which accounts for its uneven levels.*

Verna was likely attending Mapel Grove (an RNOC congregation) when she began her service with the Bible School, but followed the group that formed Hartville Conservative Mennonite Church when it withdrew from Maple Grove and the conference a year or two after her initial appointment as matron.

“In her later years she often asked perfect strangers: ‘Do you know who I am? I’m Verna Gingerich!’ After eating a good meal, she would say, ‘I have that satisfactory feeling that comes with complete fullness.’” (Verna’s online obituary)

Verna was only weeks away from her 102nd birthday when she died. I suspect she would agree with her comment from her first year as matron in 1955: “My testimony is – Christ for me.”