

PROFILES

OF MENNONITE FAITH

Amanda Dohner

Mother to Orphans

Amanda Dohner was the seventh of ten children born to Joseph H. and Mary (Hostetter) Dohner on November 2, 1852, in Montgomery County, Ohio. Her family moved to Franklin County, Pennsylvania, where Amanda was raised in the Brethren in Christ Church, also known as the “River Brethren.”

At the age of sixteen, Amanda accepted Christ as her Savior and was baptized September 1868.

As a young unmarried

woman in her mid-twenties, Amanda left Orrstown, Pennsylvania, in 1878. She arrived in Marion County, Kansas, where her younger brother Jacob H. Dohner and several Dohner cousins were already living in Catlin Township, near Peabody. Soon after her arrival, Amanda heard about serious-minded Mennonite believers who had emigrated from the Crimea of Russia and who were living at Gnadenu northwest of Peabody. Longing for fellowship with

sincere children of God, Amanda traveled to Gnadenu. After attending their worship services, visiting many of them in their homes and sharing deep spiritual discussions with their elder Jacob A. Wiebe and his wife Justina, Amanda realized a common faith. “I learned that my redeemer was also their redeemer.” Amanda especially appreci-

ated their convictions regarding plain dress and the use of tobacco. She made herself at home among these Krimmer Mennonite



The orphanage at Gnadenu

Brethren. Soon Amanda won the complete confidence of the Gnadenu community, who even invited her to teach their children English in the Gnadenu school.

Amanda had an overwhelming compassion for anyone who was alone, distressed, disconnected, abandoned or injured. Four years after her arrival in Kansas, in 1882, Amanda had a spiritual encounter, a vision of children being

(over)

cared for and trained. She accepted this vision as a divine call to gather together and care for children. As a single woman, however, Amanda felt powerless to act on this vision. In this time of waiting, she did what she could—she began sewing bed linens enough for a family of children. Eventually Amanda united with Tobias Martin from the River Brethren of Pennsylvania, who already had a longtime vision of ministry to orphaned children and who furnished some initial funds for “an orphan asylum” at Gnadenau. In March 1889 the orphan’s home at Gnadenau was founded, two-and-a-half miles south-east of Hillsboro, with Amanda Dohner as its first matron.

The first orphans arrived in November 1889 — seven children from Chicago, Illinois. By August 1890, eighteen children—“Germans, Mennonites, and Yankees”—had been received at the orphan’s home. The orphanage was officially chartered by the state of Kansas on September 15, 1890, as “The Industrial School and Hygienic Home for Friendless Persons Association.” During this time, Amanda joined the fellowship of the Gnadenau Krimmer Mennonite Brethren Church. According to the membership register, Amanda claimed two orphans as her family—David Merrs and Della Beker.

Amanda Dohner, as *Waisenmutter*, managed the children, the home and the farm. As Elder Jacob A. Wiebe related, Amanda was of “delicate health and [had] much more to do than she was able, and most of the time no one to assist her. . . . Her strict economy and kind, motherly care, has won the love and respect of the public. She and the children all eat

at the same table, of plain but the most wholesome food.”

There was strong emotional and material support among various branches of Mennonites for the orphanage. In the 1890s Elder Heinrich Wiebe and Johannes Harder made extensive fund-raising trips on behalf of the orphanage and “Sister Amanda.” Soon plans were made to replace the wooden building with a spacious four-story limestone structure. In December 1894, before the new buildings were even completed, it was reported that thirty-two orphans were currently housed in the home, twenty-five of whom had recently come from Chicago. The new stone structure was formally dedicated to the Lord in October 1896.

By the late 1890s, Amanda had given up the orphanage work due to failing health. She lived a life of devotion to God, self-denial, and compassion for children. She took very literally Jesus’ words, “Whoever receives a little child in my name, receives me.” Amanda Dohner died on October 1, 1919, in Shippensburg, Pennsylvania, at the age of nearly sixty-seven years.

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