

# **An Embodied World: Elsie C. Bechtel's Writings from Lavercaitière, France, 1945-1948**

**M.J. Heisy, *SUNY Potsdam***

In September 1945, Elsie Bechtel arrived in France to serve a two and one-half year term as a Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) relief worker. She was not quite thirty-two. A Brethren in Christ (BIC) woman from a farm family near Canton, Ohio, Bechtel had funded her college education with bouts of domestic service. With a teaching certificate from Goshen College, she had taught elementary school in the Canton area in the years before her service in France. As an MCC worker, she joined a Christian service organization founded in 1920 to provide material aid to people in areas devastated by war and natural disasters. The earliest efforts focused on the needs of Mennonites living in war-ravaged Ukraine. By the late 1930s and early 1940s, MCC's programs of food and clothing aid in Europe had expanded to serve refugee populations spawned by the Spanish Civil War and by the early years of World War II. The conflagration of that war and the entry of the United States into the war slowed MCC work in Europe. With the end of the war in Europe in May 1945, however, Mennonite Central Committee redoubled its efforts in Europe.<sup>1</sup>

Among the early postwar relief workers, Bechtel arrived in France with four other women to work with children, to distribute food and clothing, to serve as nurses, and to provide secretarial services.<sup>2</sup> Mennonite and BIC women, many of them single, had a well-established tradition of serving in their denominations' national and international missions and relief work. Much of that work flowed from old domestic roles, but pioneering efforts in settings far from organizational headquarters sometimes opened up, at least temporarily, opportunities for female leadership. Furthermore, international travel and service were exciting. Bechtel represents well combining a desire to serve with an embrace of new opportunities and adventure. The latter, she acknowledges in hindsight, was instrumental in her decision to volunteer for overseas work.<sup>3</sup>

Administrators in France sent her to a home for displaced children, housed in Lavercantière, a commune in the Department of Lot in southwest France. The Lavercantière home was the furthest from MCC headquarters in Chalon-sur-Saône, a remnant of earlier Mennonite work in Spain and southern France, and one the organization intended to close by the end of 1945. Partly through Bechtel's and her co-workers' efforts, the home stayed open until March 1948 and so was one of the longest lived Mennonite homes in France. For much of her service, Bechtel was the only North American at the home.<sup>4</sup> Although at times lonely, she just as often preferred her setting to that of other MCC workers, and, in fact, deeply loved life at the Lavercantière home.

While MCC leaders hoped to reassert Mennonite leadership of children's homes, Bechtel's focus was the daily well-being of up to one hundred children. She carried out her work with Spanish refugee and French co-workers, and in her last year, directed the home. Amid the deprivation and conflict endemic to postwar France and throughout negotiations between MCC, local governments, and national welfare agencies, Bechtel had substantial time to observe and interact with French and Spanish children and co-workers. She was a careful observer of both the world around her—its contrast to her background sometimes inspired and sometimes repelled her—and the tangled inner world of human yearning. Furthermore, she took time to write evocatively in a diary and in letters to an audience at home, made up primarily of women in her extended family.<sup>5</sup>

Bechtel wrote extensively in her diary in the early years of her service and more fitfully as she assumed more responsibility in the home. Her letters home were often lengthy, repeating much of the diary. In her last year, the letters became much longer than her diary entries. "*Be sure to keep my letters now for I haven't time to write in my diary.*"<sup>6</sup> Much of the time, the sources are interchangeable. Bechtel seemed comfortable sharing most observations and experiences with her fam-

ily. Only a few topics failed to make it into letters. And often the letters provide more detailed explanations than does the diary. In addition to her private writings, Bechtel wrote for Mennonite and BIC periodicals while in France, and perhaps intended to write retrospectively about Lavercaitière. Her life after this MCC assignment, however, was a full and busy one. While she corresponded with people she met in France for some time, her diary traveled a familiar route. Her niece found it in Bechtel's basement in the 1990s. Aware of the historical importance of such documents and of the talents of "Aunt Elsie," the family contributed the diary and later letters, articles, and photographs for historical research. Recorded reflections and an interview with Bechtel between 1996 and 2003 round out a fascinating collection on this brief period in her life. Such first-person sources are invaluable to historical study that seeks to consider not only intellectual and political leaders, institutions, and major events but also the significance of individuals at the periphery of those centers of power, the influence of daily patterns, and the way in which humans give meaning to their actions and lives. The immediacy of the diary and letters provide detail and passion lost as years passed. Her crafted stories and attentive descriptions from the 1940s and her memories many years later not only document what she did and observed but also how she understood her experiences and later evaluated them.<sup>7</sup> Finally, Bechtel's writings suggest the importance of studying individuals who may have been at the periphery of BIC and MCC institutional power but who served as the face of those communities in the larger world.

The breadth of Bechtel's lively commentary covers the natural world, village life, travel, politics, intellectual debate, unending conflict—among other topics—and their mix in a wide variety of personal exchanges. In this essay, I want to draw on Bechtel's writings to address embodied daily life. All humans are deeply marked by physical makeup, by vigor or bouts of ill health, by sexuality, and by the filters of our senses. The realities of that aspect of life, however, prove elusive in many historical sources or often go unexamined despite the availability of evidence. Bechtel's frank description of "actualities"<sup>8</sup> as well as her own pleasure often involved the body. While this physicality is only one part of her writings, ignoring it would flatten a fascinating woman while engaging it provides nuance to an understanding of cultural exchange in Lavercaitière.

In a perceptive article on Eleanor Roosevelt and U.S. Congressman Allard Lowenstein, historian William Chafe reflects on the relationship between the personal and the political and the possibilities and pitfalls of researching what is private in individual lives. His cautionary note on sensationalism or reductionism yields to his contention that whole lives include the private realm and that the personal and the political

are interdependent. The goal, however, remains understanding whole people whose individual lives are only partially elucidated by parts of life that many of us shield from the view of others.<sup>9</sup> As a historical researcher, I hope to maintain a respect for private life and use with care Bechtel's powerful writings, which were written for an intimate group and present one view of events. For this paper, other than that of Bechtel, I have changed names or left people unnamed.

Throughout Bechtel's writings two recurring themes emerge that involve the body. First, her often negative commentary on sexual mores different from her own usually turned on a critique of open female sexual expression among working-class women and often paralleled other areas of conflict with these women. On sexuality closer to home, she was discreet. Second, her own sensuous response to the world found room for much that contrasted with her background. An important strand of her enjoyment included men. Except for one case of sexual impropriety by a Mennonite, she shared both negative appraisals and delighted responses candidly with family at home. (Quotations from her correspondence are in italics to distinguish them from her diary.) Taken together, her disapproval, her joy, her silences, and her audience suggest a complex and rich inner world that sustained her in a time and social context that sometimes reduced her to "single, never married," in the words of a Bechtel family genealogy.<sup>10</sup> Bechtel did, indeed, remain single throughout her life and deeply committed to a life of service. As such, she is representative of an important group in Mennonite and BIC history.

Like other North American Christian bodies, Mennonites and the Brethren in Christ have relied on women to carry on many aspects of religious life.<sup>11</sup> Single women, in particular, have served, out of proportion to their numbers, in church schools, mission, and service organizations. That has sometimes placed them in leadership positions and often at the boundaries of the Mennonite community and the larger world.<sup>12</sup> Bechtel experienced both settings. Her MCC service in France is part of a long life of church service. Before going to France, she wrote for BIC periodicals and served in an MCC Women's Service Unit during World War II. From 1959 to 1961, she worked in West Germany and in Greece for MCC's PAX program, and from 1979 to 1981 she tutored missionary children in Nicaragua. The longest part of her life, she headed programs for children and youth in the BIC Valley Chapel Church, to which she was born, while teaching in the Canton City Schools. Over the years and well beyond retirement, she also involved herself deeply in the Canton community, informally raising a child, tutoring, serving as a docent in an art museum, and driving for Meals on Wheels.<sup>13</sup>

Documentation of the leadership of such women has begun. But attention to how they pieced together whole lives, to which the body is central, is limited.<sup>14</sup> In her writings from France, Bechtel emerges as a woman with a strong sense of well-being, boundless curiosity, and passion that sometimes exhausted but ultimately sustained her. This is not to suggest that Bechtel did not experience bouts of self-doubt and gloom, express deep prejudices, and often make hasty judgments. She was no saint, although later in life people would call her one.<sup>15</sup> Now ninety-four, Bechtel remains lively in conversation and in correspondence. My consideration of a two and a half year period, sixty years ago, provides only a snapshot in a long life that warrants more attention. The newness of crossing national and cultural boundaries, her isolation from other MCC personnel, and her relationships with French and Spanish co-workers, however, make this period of her life a fruitful one to embody an individual.

Let me begin with Bechtel's negative portrayal of sexuality in postwar 1940s rural France. True to her Anglo-American cultural roots—she identified herself as American as often as Mennonite and she never described herself as Brethren in Christ—Bechtel labeled much sexual practice she observed as peculiarly French. She expressed the expected disapproval of pre-marital or extra-marital sex. And she held the general adult fear of adolescent sexuality. One of her letters contains a litany of complaints about several women. The first was involved in an affair; the second, was jealous of a partner to whom she was not married; the third was an unmarried woman with four children, Bechtel began, "*Tonight I am so 'darned' (excuse me but it helps to say it) sick of French people.*"<sup>16</sup> Each of her examples, however, pointed to a woman in the wrong.<sup>17</sup> That one example is consistent with the way in which she judged most harshly women's sexual expression. Women who openly vaunted their sexuality also elicited her condemnation. An odd woman wore "a halter [brassiere] which shows almost all."<sup>18</sup> "[Sophie] all dressed up before noon—red blouse and all. Another man to charm!"<sup>19</sup> And again, "[Sophie] played up to the handy man in a very ugly way. She brought a book to the table and asked him to read it—getting as close as possible. Turning several pages, it proved to be "sage-femme" book. [S]he . . . showed him some pictures of babies being developed. She thought it was a huge joke, but I was *mad*."<sup>20</sup>

The women whose sexual expression Bechtel castigated most often were probably working-class women at the bottom of that class's pay scale.<sup>21</sup> She and other workers in the home were often in conflict with these women over other matters. The work of one female housekeeper, for example, was haphazard. She had two children in the home and a succession of male visitors who competed for bedroom space with a

female co-worker. A German soldier had allegedly fathered the one child, and her husband, from a distance, sought a divorce and custody of the other child. Angered by the woman's leaving the colony once with a man and "*a good Mennonite blanket to lie in some barn nearby,*" Bechtel exploded, "*I hope they were cold!*" Repeatedly, however, Bechtel and her Spanish co-workers gave the woman a chance to change her ways, at least once, in opposition to other colony workers.<sup>22</sup> (Bechtel was aware of French postwar anger focused on alleged female collaborators but probably underestimated its intensity.)<sup>23</sup> Bechtel's writings left the woman, pregnant and in jail for theft. Bechtel had tried twice to visit her there and felt "haunted" by the "severity" of the penal institution.<sup>24</sup> Even with someone as illicit as this woman, Bechtel once allowed her a voice in the diary. When Bechtel told the woman her behavior must change, the latter replied that she and her partner slept together whenever he visited and that "the children [of the home] didn't see her and everybody in France does it." Bechtel recorded the rejoinder without evaluative comments.<sup>25</sup>

Another example of Bechtel's holding women responsible for sexual probity involved a French couple. The husband worked in the village, and he and Bechtel were in conflict, particularly over religious programming in the home. When Bechtel became director, she perceived him as a threat to her leadership. But when it came to his wife's alleged extra-marital affair, Bechtel expressed sympathy. "*He has had a lot of trouble,*" Bechtel wrote home. "*His house and all his belongings [including "the finest library in all the district,"] were destroyed by the war and now his wife is rotten too.*" "[F]or once I had sympathy for [him]. He said—I laugh at no one. I've suffered enough in forty years. And if I laugh it's only . . . to keep from crying. I could have bawled then myself." "*Such stories I never heard of—only in newspapers. I feel [incapable] to help.*"<sup>26</sup>

Bechtel's attention to women's sexual behavior does not mean she was unaware of male sexual predation. One of the young women under her care recounted a sexual assault by a doctor, who "had asked her to strip and then bit her on the breast and tried to kiss her. She cried and said she had not been able to sleep because she thought I wouldn't believe her. I believe anything now of Frenchmen."<sup>27</sup> Bechtel instinctively appears to have trusted the testimony of this young woman, one for whom she expressed great affection. At another point, Bechtel discovered that "*one of the men had taken the little girls to the barn and played with them in a way that was not decent. I gave the job of talking to him to [a male Spanish administrator] but tonight I lectured the girls.*"<sup>28</sup> It would be helpful to know the content of that lecture. Was it one that stressed the need to be wary of men's intentions or one that framed the issue in terms of female responsibility?

Bechtel seems to have judged less harshly the sexual mores of co-workers whom she admired and relied upon—all of whom were Spanish Civil War refugees. In her diary, she quoted one female Spanish co-worker at length without evaluation: “she didn’t see any reason why a husband and wife who are not happy together should stay together—there is no civil law or priest who makes it right and wrong. We are like animals. Men need women and women need men. But men should find just one not live promiscuously. . . . We are Christian ‘autant que vous.’ I slept with [a co-worker] for six months and he never even as much as said ‘Bonjour’.”<sup>29</sup> Both the woman speaking and the man with whom she had had the six-month relationship were staff whom Bechtel repeatedly described as wonderful people with whom she felt kinship in the daily work of caring for children. Of the man, she once wrote, “I like him more and more. He is the most sensible person in the colony.”<sup>30</sup> Another Spanish man accused of sexual impropriety with a co-worker became someone with whom Bechtel could share a joke about her wanderings on a street in Lyon known for its houses of prostitution, someone on whom she relied for “so many odds and ends.”<sup>31</sup>

Bechtel’s commentary on the sexual behavior she witnessed was a small part of her writings, fervent but soon abandoned for other topics. As sustained a theme as any is that of the joys and beauty of sight, touch, taste, sound, and humor. She had a tourist’s eye for scenery in various parts of France and in the United Kingdom and Italy. She lavished her best fine-grained word paintings, however, on tableaus from her daily life in Lavercaitière. To provide only two examples, one October, she wrote, “The weather is perfect – It’s purple with fall flowers – odiferous with grapes – bronze with nuts and leaves – White with fog in the mornings – white with heat at noon and white with frost & moonlight at night – I’m coming aware of myself again.”<sup>32</sup> About a year later she recorded an afternoon caring for the children not as work but as a tableau. “It was a beautiful day – Small groups wandered over the meadow – Roger and Gerard [?] walked arm in arm examining the contents of a box – (There couldn’t be anything less than a cricket) . . . . Out [at] the end of the field . . . [a] group resting in the shade of a tree. Girls walked in the garden to pick flowers to bring later for my hair. . . . The scenery stretched out and around like a very detailed tapestry done in shades of green with the tan of roads, yellow of ripening wheat and red of [roofs] for variety. Let the peace flow in each pore.”<sup>33</sup>

Her attention to the physicality of daily life went beyond descriptions of landscape. A poignant afternoon with the children was also a physical one. “The boys hung on to my arm. . . . [One] little fellow never left me for an instant. He held my wrist with one hand and pushed up the sleeve of my sweater to hold my arm with the other and by and by he

walked with his head against my shoulder. The poor little kid; I guess he misses a woman's touch. I should spend more time with the boys.<sup>34</sup> She entered the upside down world of Mardi Gras with zest, noting in passing that it was the season that "made the little babies commence."<sup>35</sup> She enjoyed dances in the village and operas in cities, even when they weren't "very Mennonitish."<sup>36</sup> She spent months planning programs that were her own spectacles of color, music, and drama. She dressed with care, noting colors and particular articles of clothing.<sup>37</sup> Memories of her in Lavercaitière today include the fact that she was an attractive woman.<sup>38</sup> Among her descriptions, she sketched public displays of affection, catching desire in her detail. "Two of our compartment mates. . . . were much in love and kissed each other and held hands with us as a watchful and appreciative audience."<sup>39</sup> She remembered another tender moment between a husband and wife. "Estelle was [terrifically] happy and so was her husband. He was so delighted that he raised her scarf to look at her hair." Bechtel also remembered the woman kissing her husband on both cheeks, a practice Bechtel quickly welcomed as a part of daily life.<sup>40</sup> She often described the ritual, on one occasion indicating its extent by noting she had been kissed "for at least six layers."<sup>41</sup> Her last letter home from the colony described her tears mixing with the kisses of departing children.<sup>42</sup> And in her final reverie on the losses she would sustain as she left Lavercaitière, she included "the [onrush] of arms and lips when one drives up to the front after having been away for a short [while]."<sup>43</sup>

Bechtel was also quick to note the physical presence of other adults of her world, especially that of men. One MCC man was "a tall good looking Canadian."<sup>44</sup> An interim director of the European programs was a "silent bird. . . . yet I could catch and hold a twinkle in his eyes." She added, "I appreciated the fact that he was a large person because so many of the men here are small."<sup>45</sup> A French youth who gave her a tour of the city of Gourdon was "tall enough, handsome enough and dark enough to turn the heads of all the girls on the streets [he] showed me."<sup>46</sup> A new teacher arrived in the village: "[y]oung—thin—beautiful eyes."<sup>47</sup>

While she tended to note the physical appearance of young men and North American men, many of her friendships were with middle-aged male Spanish co-workers. When describing them physically, she noted their shortness or the fact that some of them did not consistently shave and, at least, in her early days, appeared dirty.<sup>48</sup> But they became friends with whom she laughed and shared triumphs and defeats. They were co-workers who often seemed more attuned to the complexities of relief work than did her North American compatriots. They were men whom she admired for their knowledge of art and music.

In November 1945, Bechtel wrote "[M. Caceres] had a vacation to Paris for eight days. He came back looking just as dirty as . . . when he

went. I wondered what kind of a time he had and what he did. To my surprise the high point of his trip seems to be a concert by a violinist. His love of music is something to behold. Every noon he turns on the radio full blast—will . . . curl up by the radio if something is especially good. In the evening his place is by the radio curled up almost like a girl. . . . [H]e enjoys good music and I suppose he knows more about composers than I do.”<sup>49</sup> Two years later a glance between Bechtel and Caceres brought pleasure. She wrote home, “[Lauriano] and [Caceres] are list[en]ing to the radio with their faces turned soulfully to the ceiling. [Lauriano] every once in awhile gets up to dance a few steps while [Caceres] regards him with an amused grin and a glance at me [who] shares his amusement and his appreciation.”<sup>50</sup> A year earlier Lauriano had been painting murals on the chateau walls of the home. “He comes into the room all excited and says ‘I have a lot of inspiration’ and shows me a lot of stuff he has done and asks if I like what he has done. I look at the maze of lines and circles and see nothing but the outline of a head and say with enrapture Oh it is wonderful and then miraculously in fifteen minutes there appears a truly lovely picture,” one that she photographed in color. In turn, Lauriano took time to study Bechtel’s paintings. “He says my paintings [are] naïve and would be a great success in Paris. Ha.”<sup>51</sup>

Above all, Bechtel spent time with Almenara, who had worked with MCC for five years by the time she arrived. She once described him as “a sort of supervisor to patch up misunderstanding.”<sup>52</sup> They rode trains together across France, attended plays and operas, coordinated their efforts to deal with the whims of MCC administrators and French officials. Attending an art exhibit with Almenara and North American MCC workers, Bechtel noted, “I was ashamed of our Mennonites – they seemed so ill trained in art. Happily they couldn’t talk for they could blame their ignorance on language difficulty. [Almenara] shone as always.”<sup>53</sup> Almenara seems to have reciprocated Bechtel’s admiration. Their friendship pulled in Almenara’s wife, son, and daughter when they arrived in France after a six-year separation from him. Bechtel lavished high praise on all of them. Her friendship with Almenara outlived her service in France.

Not to overemphasize her friendships with men and to place her response to those men in a larger context of sensuous pleasure, I must note that this is the same woman who could rhapsodize repeatedly over the moonshine<sup>54</sup>; over the violets of southern France, which she hoped to observe for “several hundred years” in heaven<sup>55</sup>; and over bicycle rides to “nowhere.” “I found the most enticing roads with the most beautiful curves. It was glorious.”<sup>56</sup> Bechtel was a woman who also expressed love for other women, not when they were physically beautiful or “très chic.” The latter, she once wrote, could be seen “many

times on every street of every town.”<sup>57</sup> Rather Bechtel loved the French woman who knew to bring flowers to another woman in grief; the Spanish nurse, a “*shining star . . . who has learned I guess in six years of exile to make anything out of nothing*”;<sup>58</sup> and, finally, Bechtel’s MCC female co-worker whose visits yielded gales of laughter, the sharing of confidences, and new knowledge.<sup>59</sup>

Frank in much of her writing, Bechtel turned uncharacteristically reserved when she had a male admirer. She mentions such an admirer twice—perhaps the same person both times—but she never gave the man a name and described the attention as problematic.<sup>60</sup> Consciously or unconsciously, she protected that part of her life from prying eyes in the future, and in the process draws her readers into a place where understatement enlarges the realm of sexuality even as it conforms to expected circumspection. In the larger community, Bechtel with other MCC personnel shielded an MCC leader’s alleged affair from public view, even that of her family. She referred to the affair only in her diary, and even there never spelled out the actual accusations. Rather she described the affair in terms of trauma visited on the man’s family.<sup>61</sup> This discreetness reminds us that even the most private writings are crafted and censored. Bechtel’s caution also reinforced conventions of her community. Sexuality within the community was distinct from that expressed by French and Spanish people. The former required silences; the later could be described and analyzed.

Bechtel’s writings provide a window on a private life that helped to power an enduring life of service. Considering her as a whole person with physical, intellectual, and emotional life yields one configuration in the “infinite variations in human populations,” mysteriously and simplistically, historian Mary P. Ryan points out, reduced to the polarity of men and women<sup>62</sup> and, I might add, to the ill-defined realm of sexuality. In particular, Bechtel paired moral indignation and strategic silences with frank descriptions of sexuality and of sensuous pleasure. She responded negatively to sexual practices she defined as French and the sexuality of working-class women. She accepted or at least largely ignored sometimes similar sexual practice among Spanish co-workers. For Bechtel, the physical world was one to be enjoyed, and that physical world included bodies, touch, men, and open marital affection. Attention to Bechtel’s embodied daily life is essential in understanding her deeply satisfying life, one shared liberally with others. Generalizations do not flow easily from the private writings of a unique individual. Bechtel’s social position, however, was not atypical. She joined many other single Mennonite and BIC women in lives of service. Their numbers coupled with Bechtel’s evocative writing should engage us in the larger question of the whole lives of single women.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> MCC relief work in France in the early postwar years built on earlier work in southern France between 1939 and 1945. During Bechtel's tenure, relief work in France garnered substantial resources, but ones that declined in proportion to resources directed to relief work among German-speaking people, particularly Mennonite refugees. Even in France, the goal was to coordinate programs with French Mennonite conferences. Much of Bechtel's tension with MCC administrators emanated from this shifting programmatic emphasis. By the end of the 1940s, MCC work in France—reduced in personnel, program, and material aid—connected to Mennonite congregations located in Lorraine, Alsace, and Franche-Comté regions. MCC had ongoing connections to Paris in the 1950s, including the placement of PAX volunteers with UNESCO in the 1950s. There is limited historical writing on any of the MCC work in France. The most extensive coverage appears in John D Unruh, *In the Name of Christ* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1952), chs. 3, 7 and Appendices. Also see, *Mennonite Encyclopedia*, s.v. "France," "Alsace," "Lorraine"; Altee Beechy, *Seeking Peace: My Journey* (Goshen, IN: Pinchpenny Press, 2001), ch. 5; Cornelius J. Dyck, ed., *Responding to Worldwide Needs*, vol. 2 of *The Mennonite Central Committee Story* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1980), 29, 31, 41, 44; idem, *Something Meaningful for God*, vol. 4 of *The Mennonite Central Committee Story* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1981), 132; Keim, *Bender*, chs. 13-14, 16-18, esp. 291, 358, 381, 478; Robert S. Kreider and Rachel Waltner Goossen, *Hungry, Thirsty, a Stranger: The MCC Experience* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1988), 57, 72, 79; Clarence Pickett, *For More Than Bread: An Autobiographical Account of Twenty-Two Years' Work with the American Friends Service Committee* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1953), 109, 114, 303, 306; Calvin W. Redekop, *The Pax Story: Service in the Name of Christ* (Telford, PA: Pandora Press U.S., 2001), 29, 37, 66, 76; Donna F. Ryan, *The Holocaust and the Jews of Marseille: The Enforcement of Anti-Semitic Policies in Vichy France* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 147-53.
- <sup>2</sup> See note 4.
- <sup>3</sup> Bechtel, recorded responses, November 6, 1996. See note 4.
- <sup>4</sup> M. J. Heisey, *Peace and Persistence: Tracing the Brethren in Christ Peace Witness through Three Generations* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2003), ch. 6. Half of this chapter is focused on Elsie C. Bechtel. The portrait of Bechtel in *Peace and Persistence* is based on her 1945 to 1948 diary; a November 6, 1996, recorded response to a questionnaire used in the larger study; and research in the Archives of the Brethren in Christ Church and Messiah College (BICA), Grantham, PA, 17027, and the MCC Collection in the Archives of the Mennonite Church (AMC), Goshen, IN 46526. Since writing the chapter on Bechtel, I have gained access to approximately two hundred photographs Bechtel took between 1945 and 1948 and correspondence with her family. I have done additional research in the MCC Collection; the J. N. Byler Papers, Hist. MSS 1-354; the Lois Gunden Papers, Hist. MSS 1-926, all in AMC; the BICA; and in American Friends Service Committee Records Relating to Humanitarian Work in France, 1933-1950, American Friends Service Committee, 1501 Cherry Street, Philadelphia, PA 19102. Bechtel again recorded responses to my questions in early 2003. I recorded an interview with her on July 28, 2003, Canton, OH. I have received written memoirs of the Lavercantière home from eleven people who lived in it as children or attended the commune's primary school with children from the home. My sister Nancy Heisey, who is collaborating with me on the study, and I visited Lavercantière, June 24-30, 2006; she visited Lavercantière again, October 25-27, 2007. On both visits Gilles Vilard, mayor of Lavercantière, and many others in the commune aided our research with interviews, tours, documents and most generous hospitality.

- <sup>5</sup> I have transcribed Bechtel's diary and combined it with excerpts from her letters. Bechtel and her niece Janet K. Stoner have granted permission to use Bechtel's writings, photographs, and interviews, which will eventually be housed in the BICA. I have retained Bechtel's grammar and punctuation as much as possible. I have corrected spellings and inserted missed letters in words, since there are many in her hasty writing and on her sometimes malfunctioning typewriter. Comments about letters and packages received most often reference her mother, sister, sister-in-law, and her five nieces. Her father had died in 1929. Her brother was obviously an important family member. But she noted once that he did not write often. Bechtel to family, Sept. 22, 1947; Paul Lewis Miller, comp., *Descendants of ( ) Bechtel: Father of John (1171-1823), Peter (1774-1855) and Samuel Bechtel (N.p., 2002)*, 32-40.
- <sup>6</sup> Bechtel to family, Apr. 29, 1947. The statement is made in the last two pages that do not clearly connect to the rest of the letter.
- <sup>7</sup> Oral historians have been particularly attentive to the way in which retrospective accounts serve not only the recovery of undocumented events but also the study of how people understand their lives. This emphasis on the subjectivity of oral history is also relevant to first-person sources from the period under study. See Alessandro Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different," in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, eds., *The Oral History Reader* (London: Routledge, 1998), 63-74. For a discussion of "everyday writing," see Jennifer Sinor, *The Extraordinary Work of Ordinary Writing: Annie Ray's Dairy* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2002).
- <sup>8</sup> Bechtel, diary, November 7, 1946.
- <sup>9</sup> William H. Chafe, "The Personal and the Political: Two Case Studies" in *U.S. History as Women's History: New Feminist Essays*, eds., Linda K. Kerber, Alice Kessler-Harris, and Kathryn Kish Sklar (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 189-213. Blanche Wiesen Cook's research and writing on the private lives of late nineteenth- and twentieth-century women involved in many shades of reform powerfully illustrates the potential of combining careful and respectful attention to private life with public lives. See Cook, "Female Support Networks and Political Activism: Lillian Wald, Crystal Eastman, Emma Goldman," in Nancy F. Cott and Elizabeth Pleck, eds., *A Heritage of Her Own* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 412-44; idem, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, 2 vols. (New York: Penguin Books, 1992, 1999).
- <sup>10</sup> Miller, comp., *Descendants Bechtel*, 40.
- <sup>11</sup> Ann Braude, "Women's History Is American Religious History," in *Retelling U.S. Religious History*, ed. Thomas A. Tweed (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 87-107.
- <sup>12</sup> See Mary Barga, "Singleness," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, 1989, <http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/S5678ME.html>, retrieved Dec. 21, 2007. An impressionistic survey of articles on BIC women in *Brethren in Christ History and Life* demonstrates that many of the included women performed church service as lifelong single women or during years of being single, before they were married or after they became widows. See *Index to Brethren in Christ History and Life, 1978-2002*, vols. 1-25, and volumes since the index was made.
- <sup>13</sup> Elsie C. Bechtel, "The Torch Burns Low," *Sunday School Herald (SSH)*, Oct. 11, 1942, 321-22; idem, "Good Adversiting," *SSH*, Nov. 8, 1942, 355, 357; idem, "Peace on Earth," *SSH*, Dec. 20, 1942, 405-6; idem, "With Our Church Leaders: William J. Meyers," *SSH*, Jan. 16, 1944, 23; Mary A. Stoner, *Valley Chapel Centennial, 1866-1966* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Center Square Press, n.d.), 15, 33-34, 51-55, 59; Denise Sautters, "Life Long Giving: Elsie Bechtel Sees Helping Others as a Duty and a Gift," *The Repository*, November 15, 1996; Redekop, *Pax Story*, 81.
- <sup>14</sup> Not only Anabaptist historical research has ignored the private lives of women who have remained single throughout their lives. Much of U.S. women's history, for example, focuses on private life in terms of sexual coupling, be it heterosexual,

homosexual, marital, or extramarital. The much more complex world of sex, as defined by Mary P. Ryan, is largely *terra incognita*: "Sex is what distinguishes the relation between men and women from other systems of social division and inequality (like race and class) and gives it unique depth, breadth, and power. The erotic . . . term 'sexuality,' is only one relatively minor and subordinate element in this overarching system of social differentiation. . . . Just how two polarized categories of being have been derived from all the infinite variations in human populations is the overarching and forever unsolved mystery in the history of women and men. The word 'mystery' evokes the enigma, contradiction, unpredictability, and treachery that surround this process." *Mysteries of Sex: Tracing Women and Men Through American History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 3.

<sup>15</sup> Sautters, "Life Long Giving."

<sup>16</sup> Bechtel's recurring references to "the French" way of being and acting—as sometimes a model for Americans and sometimes a paragon of vice—reflects the fascinating interchange between two "imagined" nations internally at war as often as in conflict with each other. For attention to exchanges between the nations in tourism, commerce, and everyday behaviors, see Theodore Zeldin, *France, 1848-1945: Intellect, Taste, and Anxiety* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1977), ch. 3, esp. 126-38; idem, *The French* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), esp. "Conclusion"; Richard F. Kuisel, *Seducing the French: The Dilemma of Americanization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Raymond Carroll, *Cultural Misunderstandings: The French-American Experience*, trans. Carol Volk (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

<sup>17</sup> Bechtel to family, undated letter. The information in the letters connects to a second letter, Bechtel to family October 27, 1946.

<sup>18</sup> Bechtel, diary, September 10-14, 1945.

<sup>19</sup> Bechtel, diary, undated entry in first half of October 1946.

<sup>20</sup> Bechtel, diary, October 25, 1945; Bechtel to family, October 30, 1945. A *sage-femme* book is one on midwifery.

<sup>21</sup> Bechtel often refers to the staff who cared for the children as *surveillants*, a term commonly assigned to young adults who cared for children attending boarding schools during their hours outside the classroom. Historian Theodore Zeldin describes *surveillants* as a separate class . . . despised and underpaid" and adds, "it was the lowest possible job a youth could get." *France*, 263.

<sup>22</sup> Bechtel to family, February 10, March 12, March 27, August 14, September 22, December 18, 1946; Bechtel, diary, March 10-15, 23, October 3, 1946; January 14, 1947. Bechtel's comment on the "Mennonite blanket" comes from a letter, Bechtel to Friends [probably other MCC workers], February 1947.

<sup>23</sup> See Weitz, *Sisters in the Resistance*, ch. 12 "Collaboration"; Bechtel to Cocanower, Jan. 29, 1948, IX-19-1/1/64, AMC.

<sup>24</sup> Bechtel to [family], Nov. 9, 1947. There is no salutation on this letter, but it is probably to family since most of the letters are.

<sup>25</sup> Diary, March 14, 1946.

<sup>26</sup> Bechtel to family, Oct. 27, 1946; diary, Oct. 28, 1946. I have not only mixed Bechtel's diary entry and her letter, I have rearranged her writing within both.

<sup>27</sup> Diary, Nov. 16, 1946.

<sup>28</sup> Bechtel to family, Nov. 22, 1946.

<sup>29</sup> Diary, Oct. 10, 1946. *Autant que vous* translates "as much as you."

<sup>30</sup> Bechtel to family, Jan. 24, 1946.

<sup>31</sup> Undated letter, contents place it in Christmas/New Year's season of 1947-1948.

<sup>32</sup> Diary, Oct. 4, 1946.

<sup>33</sup> Diary, Oct. 29, 1947.

<sup>34</sup> Bechtel to family, Nov. 23, 1946.

- <sup>35</sup> Diary, March 5, 1946; Feb. 18, 1947; Bechtel to friends, undated letter; Bechtel to family, undated letter. The content of the two letters place them in February 1947.
- <sup>36</sup> Diary, Nov. 4, 17, 1945; Feb. 22, Apr. 1-2, 21, July 23, Sept. 8, Oct. 2-12, 1946; undated entry during early 1948; Bechtel to family, Jan. 8, 1946; Oct. 26, 1947.
- <sup>37</sup> Diary, Sept. 14-22, 1945; Jan. 17, Feb. 1, Mar. 9, Mar. 22, Dec. 25, 1946; Jan. 4, Jan. 20, 1947; Bechtel to family, Nov. 27, 1945; Mar. 27, Oct. 27, Dec. 27, 1946.
- <sup>38</sup> Nancy R. Heisey, notes on visit to Lavercaitière, Oct. 25-27, 2007.
- <sup>39</sup> Diary, Oct. 20, 1945.
- <sup>40</sup> Diary, Sept. 14-22, 1945.
- <sup>41</sup> Diary, Oct. 26, 1946.
- <sup>42</sup> Bechtel to family, Feb. 16, 1948.
- <sup>43</sup> Bechtel, untitled and undated loose sheets in diary. Bechtel built the piece around the locking of the chateau door when the home closed.
- <sup>44</sup> Bechtel to family, Mar. 27, 1946.
- <sup>45</sup> Diary, Jan. 20, 1946; Bechtel to family, Jan. 24, 1946.
- <sup>46</sup> Diary, Nov. 20, 1946.
- <sup>47</sup> Diary, Oct. 3, 1946.
- <sup>48</sup> Diary, Dec. 1, 1946.
- <sup>49</sup> Diary, Nov. 22, 1945.
- <sup>50</sup> Bechtel to family, Oct. 26, 1947.
- <sup>51</sup> Diary, Nov. 17, 1946; Bechtel to family, Nov. 23, 1946.
- <sup>52</sup> Bechtel to family, Dec. 16, 1945.
- <sup>53</sup> Diary, Apr. 24-29, 1947; Bechtel to family, Apr. 29, 1947.
- <sup>54</sup> Diary Sept. 14-21, Oct. 20-21, Dec. 19, 1945; Oct. 4, 11, 1946; Bechtel to family, Oct. 22, 1945; Feb. 10, Sept. 7, 1946; May 4, 1947.
- <sup>55</sup> Bechtel to family, Mar. 27, 1946.
- <sup>56</sup> Diary, Feb. 13, 1946; Bechtel to family, undated letter, contents place it also as being written Feb. 13, 1946.
- <sup>57</sup> Diary, Sept. 10-14, 1945; May 7, 1946.
- <sup>58</sup> Bechtel to family, Dec. 29, 1945.
- <sup>59</sup> Bechtel's writings have many references to this woman. See especially, diary, Oct. 20-21, 27, Dec. 20, 1945; Feb. 19-27, June 12, 1946; Bechtel to family, Feb. 10, July 1, 1946.
- <sup>60</sup> Bechtel to family, Dec. 27, 1946; Feb. 23, 1948.
- <sup>61</sup> Diary, Dec. 4-9, 1945; Apr. 11-18, 1946; Bechtel, interview by author.
- <sup>62</sup> Ryan, *Mysteries of Sex*, 3.