

THE PETER SCHROCK LETTERS
(Installment III)

The following letters are from a collection of letters which were sent to Peter D. Schrock (1829-1902). Around 150 of these letters, written in German script, and stored in an old wooden box, are in the archives at Ohio Amish Library. Another 170, written in English, are in the possession of Schrock descendants.

The letters were written to Peter Schrock by friends and relatives from a number of different states. They contain a lot of personal interest items, as well as news about important events, the health of families, catastrophies, and church matters, as could be expected at a time when letters were the primary means of communicating and keeping in touch. The letters provide us a window of insight into the joys and trials, the issues and events, as well as the tenor of life in another century.

Peter D. Schrock (Schrack) was born in 1829, in the Glades settlement in Somerset Co., Pa., to David and Mary Schrock. In probably the fall of 1850 he married Susanna, the daughter of John P. and Anna Miller. They lived in Brothers Valley Twp., Somerset Co. until they moved to Preston Co. Virginia (later West Virginia) in 1860. This settlement was known as the Aurora settlement. In the fall of 1860, Peter was ordained as minister here. Daniel Beachy was bishop at this time. Tensions between conservative and liberal elements in the church prompted Peter, a conservative to look for a new home. In 1868 Peter and Susanna moved to Holmes County with their seven children, which ranged from 16 years-old to 5 months-old. Less than one and a half years later, on Sept. 17, 1869, Susanna died. Peter bought a farm in Walnut Creek Township from Paul Hershberger, and lived there until his death in 1902. His son Peter P. Schrock, grandson Joe P. Schrock, and great-grandson Ervin J. Schrock all lived on this farm in later years.

The following letters were written to Peter both while he lived in Aurora, W. Va., and in Holmes County. Written in German script, they relate news about important events in that time: a catastrophe in Holmes Co., a "sleep preacher", an extended trip, and effects of the Civil War.

The following letter came to Peter Schrock while he lived in Aurora, West Virginia, from friends Solomon and Maria Miller in Holmes County. They tell of a tragic fire that shook this community to its core. Many accounts were written of the tragedy. (see *Heritage Review*, Vol. 4, Jan. 1994) The Daniel Erb family was visiting the Jonathan Mast family in Troyer Valley when the fire took place. The Erbs and the Masts each had three children. Of the Masts, only a three year-old girl survived, and the Erbs all survived but a three year-old son, although they were badly disfigured for life.

Walnut Creek Post February 11, 1868
Holmes Co. Ohio

First a hearty and friendly greeting of love and peace to you, Peter Schrock, and also to your wife and children, with a wish for the best in both soul and body. Further I hope these few lines will find you in good health, as we are.

There are not many sick people in this neighborhood. But a terrible calamity took place in Levi Miller's church district, at Jon Masts. Maybe you have already heard of it. I will write about it as clearly as I can.

Daniel Erb, with his wife and three children came to Jon Masts to visit on the evening of the 25th of January. Evenings perhaps between 8 and 9 o'clock the oil lamp ran out of oil. Then they blew out the lamp, and took another lamp and wanted to put oil in the first lamp. They came too close to the lamp and the fire leaped into the oil can. As quick, as they say, as lightning, the can exploded and the room together with the people was on fire.

There were ten people in number and they were burnt so badly that practically no one could help the other. Jonathan Mast died two hours afterward and his son the same night. Shortly thereafter two more children died and yesterday Mrs. Mast was buried. Now there are still five living and they are far from being out of danger. Yet some of them are improving.

I myself saw several of them. They look dreadful. The hair are burned from their heads. Their faces are burnt so badly that they are not recognizable and their hands are burnt so badly

that they cannot help themselves at all.

People came from Massillon, Millersburg, and Dover to see this misfortune. The comments that I heard from them all was that they had never seen anything like it. Several who were in the war and in the killing-fields had never seen anything so terrible.

I received the letter which you wrote on January 26 on February 6, which made us glad. We noted that you were quite healthy. Grandmother has rheumatism so that she cannot do her work. I also saw in your letter that you have not sold yet.

I will now close and greet you heartily. Remember us in prayer. We are minded likewise.

Solomon and Maria Miller

The following letter was written to Peter by his brother Benjamin, who lived in Johnson Co., Iowa. In it he gives his impression and opinion of the "sleep preacher" John Troyer, apparently in response to Peter's request for his opinion.

"Sleep Preachers" were a phenomena which occurred among the plain people, (though not limited to plain groups) in the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first several decades of the twentieth century. Troyer was an unordained lay member in Johnson County who created quite a sensation by preaching lengthy sermons while in a trance. An acquaintance of Benjamin, he began preaching in 1876 and continued until his accidental death ten years later.

This was Benjamin's last letter to his brother. He died 20 days after the date of this letter.

Johnson County. Feb. 20, 1879
Iowa City, Iowa

First a greeting of love and peace to you, dear brother Peter Schrock and yours, with wishes for everything good to soul and body in this time and eternity. Further I let you know that we are in good health, as long as the good Lord wills. I hope these few lines will find you in good health. The people are generally quite healthy. Freni was in bed several weeks with a hard fever. She is up again. Gideon has married Mattie Miller.

You wanted to know what I think of Noah Troyer's preaching. I was not there often, but Abner was. He says no person could of himself speak like he does. He was there recently and he (Troyer) spoke for one and a half hours. Abner

says he understood every word, and that he did not say one word wrong. It appears that you heard he makes many mistakes. This is not so.

He gets a spell and is unconscious. He becomes so sick that one does not know what to do. He becomes very stiff and then stretches himself. At last he lays there almost like dead. His body is stretched out. Finally he rises and begins to speak very earnestly, some in German and some in English. He begins with a prayer and ends with a prayer. Then he sinks down and remembers nothing of what he preached.

He is a kindly man since I have known him. He is peaceable with everyone, does good, and is friendly. He speaks God's Word pure and undefiled. There were many people there, from 15 to 20 miles away, both English and German. They generally agree with his message. They say they have not heard a better sermon in their lives.

I would not undertake to say anything against it. There is no deception involved. He tells us the dangers more clearly than we could put into words. There are some in our congregation who have spoken quite harshly against him, but their own faults they do not see.

I have often thought on Deuteronomy ch. 16, verses 30-33, how there they murmured. Oh, it is to be feared that this comes from God. I cannot think otherwise. I wish you could hear him yourself. He does not get flustered. It seems he must only open his mouth and it speaks for him.

Remember us in your prayers. We also have in mind to do so for you. The weather through January was quite cold, good sledding roads. In February, the first half was nice and now it is cold. So much from me. Benjamin Schrack

The following letter was written to Peter by his niece Barbara and her husband Jeremiah Kaufman from Iowa. They relate news of an unusual and extended trip east (eleven weeks) to visit relatives. "Cousin visiting" was an important means of maintaining family ties, made possible by cheap and efficient rail travel.

Jeremiah had been married to Barbara's sister Judith, who were the daughters of Peter's sister Veronica, married to Abner Yoder. After Judith died at 38 years of age, Jeremiah married Barbara, who was 35 then.

November 23, 1888 Wellman P.O.
Washington Co., Iowa

Now I sit down to write a few lines to all of

you. First I greet you heartily. We are as healthy as usual and I hope this writing will find you well also.

We came home November 9th and found everyone well. The children have grown and we are glad that we finally came home. We were gone eleven weeks and one day. We were not homesick yet, but we were tired of it the last weeks. But we visited many good friends.

We were in Pennsylvania [Somerset] three weeks and it rained almost all the time. We saw the sun only a few times. Mike Schrack is very feeble. He is very senile and still wants to work but is not able to, and she cannot walk unless she pushes her chair around and walks after it. Philip looks after them.

William has many troubles. His wife lost her mind and was in Pittsburg three years. Then she died about seven weeks before we came there. He brought her home and buried her at home. Since that time, his barn burned down from lightning and all his farming implements burned with it. He had to feed his horses from a wagon. His hay and grain is all burned up.

Mike's John lives in Rowberi [?] and has consumption. His appearance is so poor that I do not believe he will live until spring. I could tell you much more if I were with you. Udi (Judith) Yoder gets along well, but she has aged so that I would not have known her, if I had not known that it was her.

Benedicts get along fairly well and old Kate Schrack gets along very well. She has not aged much. Old Susan Lemon is not so well off. She was very sick in the spring, but she can care for herself again. She has a girl living with her.

Everything still looks like it did in Pennsylvania. The people have built better buildings. They have so many; new barns in the Glades. Uncle Mose Schrack [Peter's brother] are as they usually are. They went with us a day. Write us whether cousin Crist is already at your place. We thought you have hilly land in Ohio but Pennsylvania is much worse yet. One must just wonder that the people can make a living. It is all hills and rocks in Conemaugh. In the Glades it looks about like it does with you.

The people were all friendly and received us well, but we did not have a good way to get around. We missed some cousins. We visited 43 of my cousins and missed nine. We saw 42 of Jeremiah's and missed nine more. Emri tolerated the traveling well and was at home everywhere. He still sucks his thumb and he did not

recognize the rest of the children when we came home. We got our dried peaches and apples without a problem.

Today the menfolk finished husking corn. Last night sisters Lizzie and Fannie were here. They still get around well. Today is the 27th and I almost do not have time to write. We came home Friday and Sundays Fannie went away to work. Now Barbara and I are alone to do the work. But we still went visiting two days. Brother Dave Kaufman's wife from Kansas is in the area so we went with her to visit. Yesterday Gideons were here. Sundays the church is to be at Eli Kinsingers, so come and go along!

There is a wedding in the making in the neighborhood: Hiram Yoder and Ida Swartzen-truber. Abner is now also in the town in that store where John is. Fannie keeps house for Peter Schrack in Barbara's place. She is in Nebraska at Emma's. She will stay four weeks.

We were in Indiana at John Gnegis. He has such a bad face! His lower jaw has a hole so that you can see his teeth, and his one eye is completely closed. He looks so poor and thin and he can barely eat. He said he thinks he will starve to death. Brother John Kaufman went with us a week and a half. We got around a lot and it pleased us. We were in Indiana three weeks. One day before we came, they had communion and ordained Yune Plank as preacher, a son of John Plank. So much from us,
Jeremi and Barbara Kaufman

To Peter Schrack and to all our good friends. Write and don't forget us. We won't forget you. Good night.

The 1861-1865 Civil War caused a lot of hardships and uncertainties among the plain people in the eastern states. The following letter, written by Peter's brother-in-law Abraham Miller from Somerset Co., tells of severe fines he and his brother paid to get out from serving in the military. The usual fine was \$300, but they had to pay 4-6 times that much. This is put into perspective when one considers that a farmhand's wages were \$10 per month, farms sold for \$12-60 per acre, and apples sold for 25 cents per bushel. No wonder he writes: "Es hat mol gropt!"

Abraham expresses some sentiments about the rebels which are not in keeping with conscientious objection to violence and war. These, no doubt, were fired by their unjust treatment. The

letter was sent to Peter while they lived in Preston County, (West) Virginia.

May 22, 1865

Elklick Co.
Somerset, Pa.

Beloved brother-in-law and wife, Peter and Susan Schrack,

I take time to write to you a few lines because it is so far to travel to you. Yet we can visit together through a letter.

We are not all healthy today. Freni and I are a little under the weather right now. I hope it is nothing but a cold and headache. I hope you are all healthy. We still live on Jacob P. Miller's place. If we had stayed in Maryland, we would have been fortunate.

I guess you heard that I and brother John were drafted. It was very costly for us. It cost me \$1875.00. I may receive some money back, but it is not sure. It cost John \$1300.00. We can work a long time for that.

But I thank God that the rebels were soundly thrashed. I hope not one rebel will remain when Grant and President Johnson are done with them.

The weather is wet, so wet that we could not work in the soil. The market for butter is 25 cents per pound; wheat 1.50 to 2.00 [per bushel] sugar 12 to 15 cts per pound; oats 75 cts, brown muslin 50 cts. per yard; calico from 30 to 45 cts: butter kegs 80 cts. per piece.

Write to me and let me know all the news and how your family is.

Your humble servant,
Abraham Miller

The following letter, written at the beginning of the Civil War, relates about a fatality caused by the war. It was written by John P. Miller, Peter's father-in-law and father to Abraham who wrote the above letter. He lived in Maryland at the time and Peter lived in Preston County.

Cove, Allegheny Co. MD August the 12th, 1861

Peter Schrack,

First a greeting to you. We are healthy and hope you are also in good health. We have not heard a long time from you.

It is told us that Joseph Speicher was shot to death in his own field by the Seceders. Write me whether you have been in danger and whether you still are. We have not seen any danger so far. I do not hope to have any difficulties,

yet one does not know.

We finished making hay the 8th of the month. We still have 300 shocks of rye standing outside. Today is the fourth day that we had much rain, or we would be finished.

It pleases Rudys well to live here with us, and we also are happy with them.

The oats is good, and the wheat also. The rye did well, and they hay was especially good. My bull calf is still better yet. It was born the 7th June and now weighs 300 pounds.

Yours Truly,
John P. Miller.

The following letter came to Peter in Holmes County from his brother Moses who lived in Somerset Co., Pennsylvania. In it he mentions both the wild and domesticated animals they had.

April 2, 1871

First, a greeting to you Peter and children. Herewith I let you know that we, praise God, are healthy so long as the good Lord wills. Further, the people are mostly in good health at this time. We have very nice weather.

On the 20th of March I sowed my summer wheat. On March 26 the church was at our house. On April 2 we had a singing at our place. Further, about the wildcats, I do not care for them at all. Manassa caught one. That one will not bite us anymore.

I sold a 3 year-old mare for 160 dollars. Now I have a colt out of Del who is 2 years old this spring. I have often been offered \$100 for it. We have six work horses. If we have good fortune, we will get three more colts soon. We have 16 cows.

Now I will send you those grafts. I think they will dry out too much in the letter, but I will try it. Write me soon whether you got them.

So much from your well-wisher,
Moses and Catharina Schrack