

# Naomi Collier Martin

Naomi Collier was a girl who loved school so much that in 1919 she left her close-knit family and rented a room in a town twenty-five miles away to attend high school. She was only sixteen at the time, but this fearless approach to life would be her hallmark as she carried out her vocation as teacher and wife of a Mennonite pastor in Waterloo.



When Collier married Jesse Martin in 1926 she left a teaching job at a school across the river from her family home in Missouri. When the newlyweds arrived in Waterloo, the new bride embraced an entirely different way of life, adapting to the faith and culture of the Old Order Mennonites.

In 1929, Jesse Martin was appointed pastor to the Erb Street Mennonite Church. The couple made a home in the first Mennonite parsonage in Ontario, living a very frugal existence during the Great Depression.

At the time, pastors received no salary, so Jesse Martin worked at a dairy part-time and taught at the Ontario Mennonite Bible School. Despite their meager income, the Martins always had food for the needy. “. . . some persons in Waterloo knew that the Martin household was one place where you could always get food, so tramps and transients stopped frequently.”

Naomi Martin kept a vegetable garden and canned vegetables, fruits and jams to help feed her family. An able seamstress, Martin reworked second-hand clothes for her children’s wardrobe, took in boarders and did housecleaning for other families. Gifts from the congregation included a daily quart of milk and two dozen eggs every week.

The dire financial situation was made worse by Jesse Martin’s long absences from home in his work as pastor and later bishop. Their son James said once, “So many times when dad was gone, mother was really left holding the bag. He’d leave and there was no money. Sometimes there was less than a dollar in the house.”

When Jesse Martin despaired, wondering if he should do something different, Naomi encouraged him to remain a pastor and give “himself to the Lord’s work.”

Despite their own financial difficulties, Naomi Martin reached out to the community, teaching Sunday school and summer Bible school. She always taught little ones, but later she taught mothers and senior citizens. She served on many committees of the local Sewing Circle and formed a girls’ group called the Cheerful Sunshine Band in the late 1930s.

Sewing Circles were actively involved in relief work, providing bedding and food and doing outreach work with the sick and the poor. Martin encouraged the women to put “love in the stitches” of their sewing. “All of our work should be done because of a conviction that it is an expression of Christian love.”

She visited the sick, and helped care for children with severe handicaps through her volunteer work with the Rotary Club. She and her husband were both involved in the Ailsa Craig home for disturbed boys that was established by the Mennonite Central Committee. A highlight of her life was a six-month trip to Israel where the Mennonite church was establishing a mission.

After her husband's death in 1974, she volunteered at the Fairview Mennonite Home and in 1979 sold her house and moved into the residence. While living there, Martin continued her service work helping residents.

When asked about the difficulties, especially the financial hardship during her early years as a pastor's wife, Naomi Martin was said to have replied, "But there was the joy of service."

*Photo from the collection of Nora Shantz.*