

EPHRATA'S CLOISTERS

Good day everyone...it's a beautiful day in Pennsylvania.

One comes to Ephrata for many things; for our recently recorded fun-filled street fair, but mostly for a look backwards into a part of the religious history of Pennsylvania and America. For here at Ephrata, in Lancaster County in 1732, Conrad Beissel, a wanderer after his own Holy Grail, established a sect known as the Seventh Day Baptists. Today, the Pennsylvania Historical Society maintains their remains on the Pennsylvania tours of history; the place where some of America's finest religious music of the 18th century was composed and where the illuminating arts took on their greatest import in early America. Beissel's music forms the basis of what is known as "Vorspiel" a musical drama, which is presented annually during summer and fall at Ephrata. The music, beautifully sung and chanted, transports one back into the centuries. The ancient Ephrata press, restored now, is used to recapture the excellent quality of printing which made the Cloister famous during Colonial times--illuminating printing which was done by Protestant "sisters". Ephrata was then one of the seats of monastic life in America. Today, one senses there the character of the institution as it was in Beissel's time. Medieval in design are the houses and buildings, with steep gable roofs that kick at the ends; rows of small, irregular windows and dormers and walls covered with roughly hewn and weathered clapboards. The place tells a remarkable story of a spiritual quest by spittitual peoples, who devoted their lives to worship, meditation and work. The community became one of the leading publishers of colonial times, specializing in religious

musical and printed work. The style of print is not too unlike ancient Gregorian chant hymnals. Ephrata prospered through the years from farming, and its gristmill, flaxseed oil production and a paper mill and tannery--and the fine loomwork of the people there was well known. Yet only a handful of community folk kept Ephrata alive in the 19th century, and it was disbanded in 1934. The Commonwealth and the Ephrata Associates now maintain it; a fine stopping place, where one's memory can conjure up the significant and important work done there. This in the day when the purpose of Pennsylvania, envisioned by Penn, Beissel, Jesuits along the Conewago, Mennonites, Amish, Dunkards and others, was that the fulfillment of man's destiny was somehow entwined in a living exemplification of religion's mysticism. Such was the case at Ephrata Cloisters, and those spirited yet meditative people left us much in hymn and art for which to be thankful for their now non-existent existence.

This is Pete Wambach. It's a beautiful day in Pennsylvania.