



The Eicher Sisters: Anna and Maria

Anna and Maria Eicher emerge from Ephrata's history among the more controversial people in the Ephrata Community. They were some of Beissel's earliest followers, although one eventually left and the other remained, becoming the first Prioress of the Roses of Sharon, the female celibate order. Their lives provide an interesting lens through which to view the settlement.¹



The Eicher Cabin, built in 1733, in the Ephrata Community Park.

In 1726, Daniel Eicher, Anna and Maria's father, attended a Love Feast fellowship meal among the Conestoga Brethren congregation. At the meeting Daniel Eicher met Conrad Beissel, the charismatic leader of the group. Later that year, Anna and Maria Eicher chose baptism by Beissel, making them some of his earliest followers. When Beissel condemned marriage at a meeting, Daniel Eicher severed his relations with Beissel. The Eicher sisters decided to leave their parent's home, seeking lodging closer to Beissel. In 1732, Beissel moved to the site of Ephrata and several months later Anna and Maria Eicher followed. The few Brothers then in the settlement did not welcome women residents, but with Beissel's approval, the Brothers constructed a home for the sisters on the opposite side of the Cocalico Creek from the community. They hoped by placing the women across the creek they would dispel any rumors associated with single men and women living in the wilderness. Eventually Daniel Eicher rejoined Beissel and purchased the land on which the cabin stands, building his own residence next door to the cabin. The sisters' 1733 house, altered through the years, remains as the oldest structure in Ephrata.

Anna Eicher, the older of the two sisters, became the inspiration for much of the gossip connected to Beissel. Historical records do not clearly indicate when the events of her story occurred. It may have happened before coming to Ephrata or shortly after the community began in 1732. The *Chronicon Ephratense*, the community's history published in 1786, says that Anna proposed marriage to Conrad Beissel which he rejected. Anna then wished to assume Beissel's surname, a privilege also denied. She then claimed to have given birth to Beissel's child that she says they both murdered. When pressed by civil authorities, Anna recanted and withdrew from the community, marrying a man named Mosselman, and dying shortly thereafter. The motivations for Anna's actions remain unknown, but perhaps she was jealous of the attention Beissel paid to her spiritually devoted younger sister, Maria.

Maria, devoted to the ascetic aspects of Beissel's theology, drew the leader's attention, earning her the appointment of Prioress of the Sisterhood. In this position, she oversaw the daily work and lives of all the Sisters. She managed the Sisters' funds, using them to pay Householder Michael Miller for new windows for the Sisters' House. While the Brothers could have done the work, this payment to a married member kept the single Brothers out and away from the celibate Sisters. Maria may have also led some of the Sisters' devotional activities including the midnight worship service. She seems to have stirred trouble between Beissel and her peer, the Prior in the Brothers' House, leaving her in peace. During the approximately 25 years of her sole leadership, five different men held the same position of Prior among the Brothers. Eventually, Maria declared the Sisters so independent of the Brothers that the women would no longer attend worship services with the men. When counselled to pull back from her hard stance, she refused, and Beissel removed her as leader among the Sisters. Records suggest that after her fall, Maria withdrew for a time and seemed ashamed of her failure. For a time, she may have considered leaving the settlement and living apart, but most of the wounds healed and she rejoined the sisters until her death. Maria never reconciled with Beissel.

Anna and Maria Eicher demonstrate how internal politics could affect the life of the community. The actions of both Eicher sisters: Anna, as the source of rumors, and Maria, as a strong and independent leader, also shows the powerful influence of women in Ephrata.

¹ Clarence Spohn, *The Eicher Family and Their Homestead*. Ephrata, PA: Eicher Arts Center, 1995.