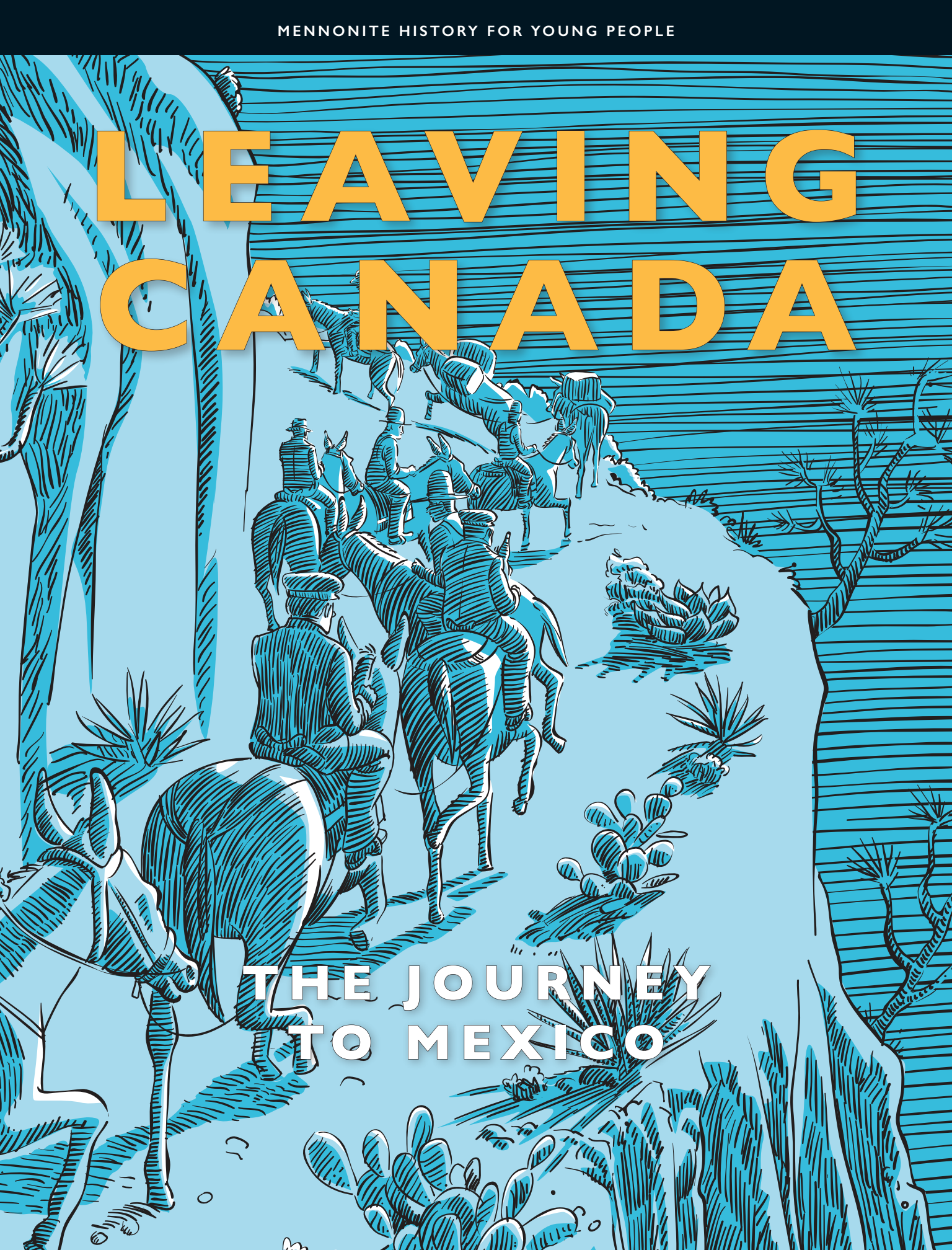


# LEAVING CANADA



THE JOURNEY  
TO MEXICO



# LEAVING CANADA

**Mennonite History for Young People**  
Volume One

# LEAVING CANADA

## THE JOURNEY TO MEXICO

**Rosabel Fast**

D. F. Plett Historical Research Foundation

2016

Rosabel Fast has taught language arts and social studies in elementary schools and written readers for German Mennonite schools in Mexico. She holds two graduate degrees, in history and adult education, with a specialty in teacher education. She applies her passion for, and delight in, engaging learners through the use of authentic, interesting and relevant content, and in creating educational resources for learners and their teachers. Her series *Mennonite History for Young People* is one of these resources.

D. F. Plett Historical Research Foundation,  
Winnipeg, Canada  
[www.plettfoundation.org](http://www.plettfoundation.org)

© Rosabel Fast 2016  
All rights reserved

Printed in Canada  
20 19 18 17 16 1 2 3 4 5  
ISBN 978-0-9694504-2-9

Art Director and Graphic Designer: Anikó Szabó  
Illustrator: Lynn Shwadchuck  
Cartographer: Douglas Fast  
Copy Editor: Michael Zajac  
Photograph Scanning and Retouching: Jerry Sutherland

Photographs from *75 Jahre Mennoniten in Mexiko*, 1997,  
courtesy of Comité Pro Archivo Histórico y Museo Menonita,  
CP 31500 Cd. Cuauhtémoc, Chihuahua, México.

**Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication**

Fast, Rosabel, author  
Leaving Canada : the journey to Mexico / Rosabel Fast.

(Mennonite history for young people ; volume one)  
ISBN 978-0-9694504-2-9 (paperback)

I. Mennonites--Mexico--History. 2. Mennonites--Manitoba--History. 3. Mexico--Emigration and immigration--History. 4. Manitoba--Emigration and immigration--History. I. D.F. Plett Historical Research Foundation, issuing body II. Title.

BX81 I9.M49F38 2016 j289.7'72 C2016-902822-4

# CONTENTS

Map: North America .....	vii
Introduction.....	ix
Words, Words, Words.....	xi

## ONE: BEFORE YOU READ THE STORY ..... I

1 What Does “Old Colony” Mean?.....	1
2 What Is a Colony? .....	2
3 How to Build a Colony.....	5
4 Three Colonies, One Example .....	8
This Might Also Interest You . . .	
What Makes a Colony a Good Colony? .....	9

## TWO: DEPARTURE ..... 13

Prologue: Life Is a Walking Stick.....	13
1 A Hard Decision .....	15
2 Land.....	15
3 Six Delegates Chosen .....	16
4 David Rempel’s Diary .....	17
Map: The Delegates’ Journey .....	18
5 A Land Deal.....	23
6 The Hardest Part Was Selling the Land .....	24
This Might Also Interest You . . .	
Mother’s Land .....	27
7 Our Mexico Storyteller .....	30
8 Will We Ever See You Again? .....	30
9 Fast, Faster, Fastest! .....	32
10 Trust in God and Enjoy the View .....	35

CONTENTS

**THREE: Arrival** ..... 37

1 What Have We Done? .....37  
2 Did God Really Create This Dead Land? .....38  
3 The Town .....41  
4 Get Those Trains Unloaded! We Have Two Days.....42  
5 Night Falls Early in Mexico .....44  
6 Breakfast Has Never Tasted This Good .....46  
7 Mennonites Meet Mexicans .....47  
8 Sandstorms, Not Snowstorms! .....48

**FOUR: First Things First**..... 53

1 Taking Care of Life’s Necessities.....53  
2 Wells and Water .....54  
3 Food and Feed.....54  
4 Houses.....55

**FIVE: Hard Times and Good Times**..... 57

1 Rain .....58  
2 A Wheat Farmer Learns to Grow Crops All Over Again.....60  
3 When There Is No Doctor .....62  
4 Friedensruh, a Village That Died .....63  
5 Finding the Funeral .....64  
6 Letters .....68  
7 The Minister Reflects.....69  
Map: Two Colonies.....70



CONTENTS

**SIX: The Other Two Colonies** ..... **73**

**1** Swift Current Colony ..... 73

**2** Sarah’s Tales: the First School at Swift ..... 75

**3** Sarah’s Tales: a Prank ..... 75

**4** Hague Colony Mennonites Come to Durango ..... 76

Notes ..... 79

Fifty Words! That Might Be New for You ..... 80

Sources ..... 82

## NORTH AMERICA

From their villages in Manitoba and Saskatchewan in Canada, the Mennonites in this story travelled south across the United States to build new homes in Chihuahua and Durango in Mexico.



## INTRODUCTION

This is the story of about 6,000 people who moved from Canada to Mexico in the 1920s. It is also about their **descendants**, their children and grandchildren. The story begins in the 1920s and ends around 1960.

It is about Old Colony Mennonites in Mexico. Today, many descendants of these people live in Ontario, Alberta, Manitoba, Texas, Kansas and other places in Canada, the United States, Central America and South America.

This is a true story about the past. It is a history. In writing history, we can only tell the stories that we know about, those that were left behind for us. History is the truest story we can tell with the information we can find.

History is not about people who *died* long ago. It is about people who were *alive* in the past. To enjoy history we must get into the lives of the people. As we learn facts from the past, we start to think about what it must have been like to have been there. The more information we find about the olden days, the closer we come to knowing what it was like to live in those days.

Then we can start to think about what history means. What would our forebears, grandparents and great grandparents, want us to know about them? What would they like us to remember about them? What would they like us to learn from them?

\* \* \*

In this book you will also read vignettes. These are stories that introduce a section of history. To write the vignettes, I looked at the facts and information that I had about the past. Then I wondered about what life must have been like in Mexico in the 1920s and 1930s. How did the children, young people and their families experience life? I wrote the vignettes to describe what their experiences could have been like.

—the author



## WORDS, WORDS, WORDS

### **Bold words**

In this reader you will find words that are in **bold**. These are words that you may not know. Don't worry. The meaning of a bold word usually comes right after the word.

You can also find all the bold words and their meanings in a list at the back of the reader. The list is **alphabetical**, in A-B-C order.

### **Italicized words**

You will also see words that are in *italics*. These are words from a language different than English: German, Plautdietsch (Low German) and sometimes Spanish. Usually the English word comes right after the italicized word. At the bottom of the page you will see a note with a guide for how to pronounce the word.

Do you like to learn new words from another language?

Yes? Use the guide for pronouncing the words so that you can say the new words.

No? Don't worry. You do not need to read the Plautdietsch or German or Spanish words to understand the stories in this reader. You can jump right to the English meanings that come after the foreign words.

Another use for italics is emphasizing an English word. For example: The train *roared* into the station – means the roar was loud.

### **What does a small star\* after a word mean?**

The star, called an asterisk, means that you can find more information about the word in a note at the bottom of the page.

A second word on the same page is marked with a dagger<sup>†</sup> (also called an obelisk).

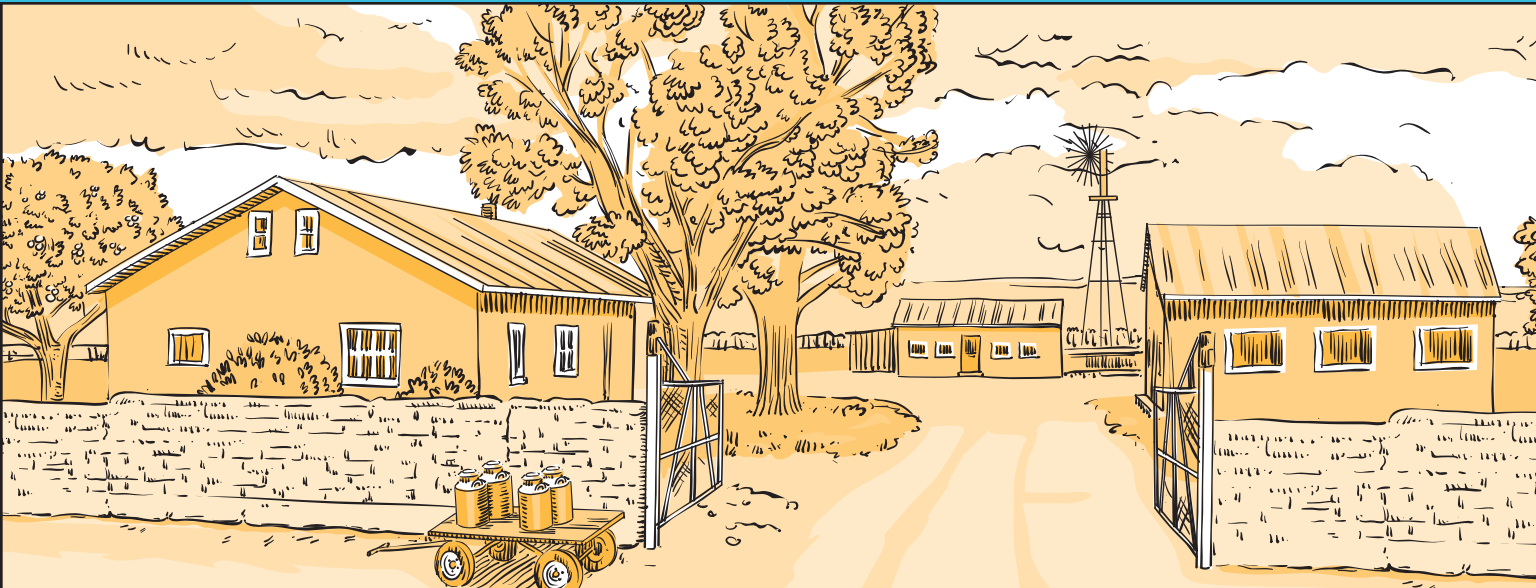
### **Did you know that . . .**

Mennonites who live in Mexico today often know four languages! Plautdietsch, German, Spanish and English.



# Before You Read the Story

## CHAPTER ONE



## 1 WHAT DOES “OLD COLONY” MEAN?

The name Old Colony comes from Russia. The first Mennonites in Russia settled on a colony. They called their colony Chortitza. As more Mennonites arrived in Russia, they **founded**, started their own colonies. Soon everyone was calling the first, oldest, colony the Old Colony. The people who lived there or came from there were called Old Colonists.

In 1874, Mennonites began to move from Russia to Manitoba, Canada. The first three Mennonite groups in Manitoba were called *Bergthaler*, *Kleine Gemeinde* and *Reinländer*\* Mennonites. The *Reinländer* were the largest group.

Most of the people who moved to Mexico in the 1920s were members of the *Reinländer* Mennonite Church. In Mexico they **reorganized**, renamed their church, and called it the Old Colony Mennonite Church. Now the name of the people was also the name of their church. They were Old Colony people who belonged to the Old Colony Church. This history tells the story of Old Colony Mennonites in Mexico.

The people in this story had many different roles. They were pioneers, settlers, neighbours, villagers (they lived in villages), colonists (they lived on colonies) and, of course, Mennonites. In this history all these different words are used for the group of people in Mexico called Old Colony Mennonites.

The characters in this story were, of course, just ordinary people. They were youth,<sup>†</sup> children, women, men, mothers, fathers, grandparents, friends and relatives, just like they are today.

## 2 WHAT IS A COLONY?

When they moved to Mexico from Canada, Mennonites settled on colonies. What is a colony?

### A Colony Is a Large Block of Land

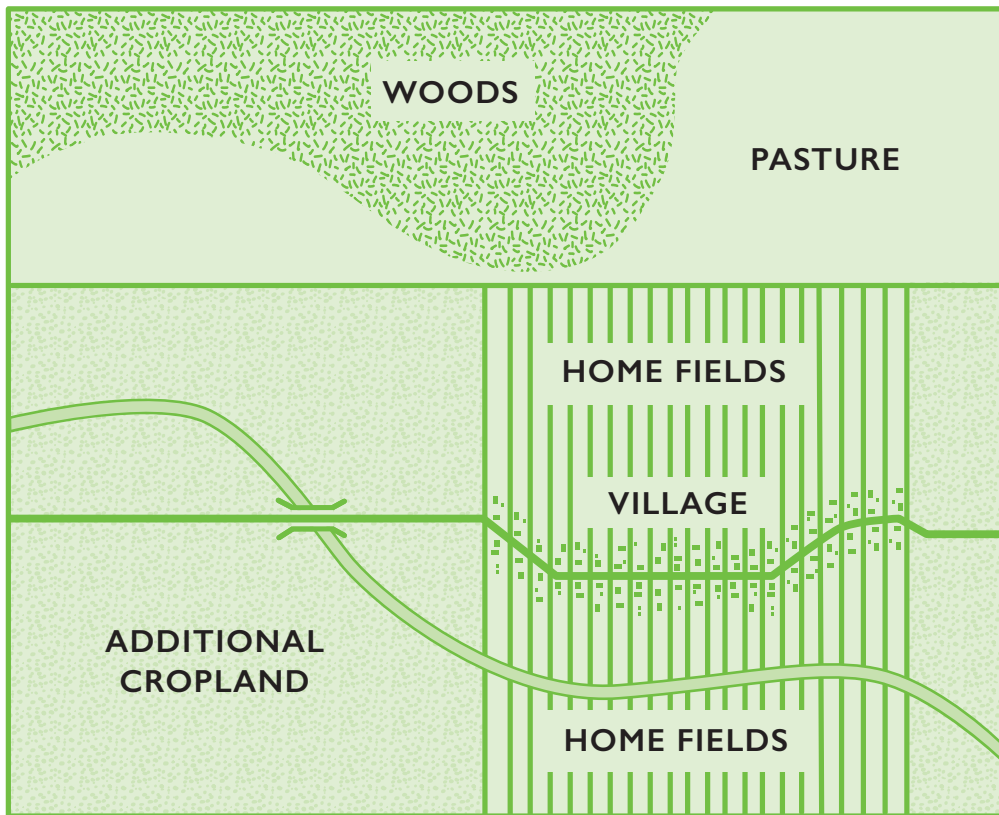
A colony in Mexico was a large **tract**, an area of land, divided into villages. A village had one or two streets with homes along each side. Each family had a house along the street, and a big farmyard around the house. Their farm also had a large field at the back for growing crops. Every family owned their own farm. The village also had a community pasture that belonged to the whole group. This is where the cows were sent every morning to graze for the day. Each village hired a cowherd who watched the cows during

---

\* Pronounced BERG·tall·er, KLY·neh ga·MIND·uh, RINE·lend·er.

† Young people, aged twelve and up, were called the *Jugend* – pronounced YOU·ghent. They had their own place or role in their village. In this reader *Jugend* are called the youth.





A Mennonite village plan, with a street down the middle and farmyards on each side of it. Every family home had its own long, narrow field.

the day and brought them back home in the evening.

### A Colony Has Its Own Government

People who lived on the colony were usually citizens of Mexico. As citizens they had to obey the laws of the land. They also had their own government on the colony. The colonists **elected**, chose, two groups of leaders: one for the church and one for **civil**, everyday life on the colony. The head church leader was called the *Ältester* or bishop. The *Ältester* guided the people and taught them their faith. The colony also elected ministers who worked with the *Ältester*. A deacon was elected by the church to look after the poor people. Church leaders were chosen for life.

The civil leader of the colony was called the *Vorsteher*\* or superintendent. The *Vorsteher* was responsible for everyday matters such as: building and

---

\* Pronounced FOOR-shtay-er.

fixing bridges, looking after the colony money, collecting taxes and many other things. Each village also elected its own *Schult* or mayor. A Schult looked after everyday life in the village. Hiring the schoolteacher and taking care of the school were two of the Schult's most important jobs. The civil leaders were elected for a couple of years at a time.

### **A Colony Has Its Own Schools**

Each village had a school. Colony children were raised by their parents, their village and their school. They did not go to Sunday School because they learned their Bible stories, Catechism, prayers and hymns at school.

## Colony Facts

### **How big was a colony?**

- Manitoba Colony bought 155,000 acres of land in Chihuahua, Mexico.
- Swift Current Colony bought 74,125 acres in Chihuahua, Mexico.
- Hague Colony bought 35,000 acres in Durango, Mexico.

### **How much did moving cost?**

Altogether, moving to Mexico cost one million dollars.

### **Who lived where?**

People who lived together in one village in Canada usually wanted to live with the same people on the new colony. Most people wanted to live near their family members.

To settle the Durango Colony, Canadian villages travelled together as a group. In Mexico they set up their same village.

## A Colony Is a Community

A colony was a place where people worked together. They also depended on each other. When they needed help, they called their neighbours. When their neighbour needed help, they had to be ready to lend a hand.

## A Mennonite Colony Is a Place where People Live Their Faith

For Old Colony Mennonites, living together in villages was part of being a Christian people. Their rule for living was that their everyday life must **demonstrate**, show, their Christian faith. Living on a colony made it possible to show how this rule worked. Worshipping in church, going to school, playing with friends, cleaning the house, feeding the farm animals were all part of faith. Faith and everyday life were not separate. They were one.

In the 1920s, no colony had electricity and no family had a car or truck. Families used oil lamps for light. They travelled by horse and buggy. People worked with their hands without using electric machines. Life was simple and **humble**, not proud.

Everyone on the colony had work to do. Children also had a part. Their parents gave them jobs that they could manage at their age. After the work was done, children had time to play. Adults and young people also found time for visiting with their friends.

The villagers learned this lifestyle and rule-to-live-by from the Bible and the New Testament. The words they read there guided them in living together, simply and peacefully in villages on a colony.

# 3 HOW TO BUILD A COLONY

The first colonies in Mexico were called: Manitoba, Swift Current and Hague or Durango. The Manitoba Colony in Mexico followed a building plan that went like this: (a) get land, (b) move, (c) get started, (d) get settled.

## a. Getting Land

- ◀ Buy a big tract of land:
  - Find out how many people will be living on the colony and decide

how much land each family will need.

- Make sure there will be land for families who come later.
- Make sure the land is good farmland.
- Look for land. When you find the right piece buy it.

◀ Survey the land:

- Travel across the land you have bought and decide where each village will be laid out.
- Measure the land and mark the village sites.
- Divide each village into lots, one lot per family.
- Measure and mark the fields that will belong to each village.
- Draw the plans you make on large sheets of paper.

◀ Tell your people what you found:

- When you get back home call a meeting. Tell the people about the land you bought. Show them the plans you drew.
- Tell them how much they will have to pay for their land.

◀ Divide up the land:

- Let the people decide with whom they will live in their new village.
- When everyone has decided on their village group, have each group pick a village site. This is done by drawing lots. (Each family picks a number to see which village lot will be theirs.)

## **b. Moving**

◀ Decide what you need to bring from Canada, for example:

- horses and cows
- pigs
- chickens and geese
- grain tanks for storing grain
- wagons
- buggies
- farm implements like ploughs, harrows and rakes
- steam-powered tractors
- barbed wire for fences
- wood for building houses and corrugated iron for the roofs
- furniture
- feed for the animals on the trip

- food for the family on the trip
  - food for the first months on the new colony
  - tents or other shelter for the first weeks
  - bedding
- ◀ Hire trains to move everyone and everything you will need to set up your colony.
  - ◀ Load the train boxcars.
  - ◀ Pack last-minute things to take with you on the train.
  - ◀ Get on the train, wave goodbye to your friends and relatives and travel to your new homeland.

### **A Train or Trains?**

The Manitoba Mennonites **chartered** thirty-six trains for their move. Each train had passenger cars for people, boxcars for their goods, and cattle cars for their animals. Each family needed several boxcars for all their belongings.

### **What did that cost?**

Each train cost around \$30,000 or more to hire.

### **c. Getting Started**

- ◀ Unload your train.
- ◀ Move your belongings to your village site.
- ◀ Find a place to live and sleep. For example, set up a tent village.
- ◀ Find water. If you're lucky you'll find a spring nearby. Carry water from the spring to your home. As soon as possible, dig a well.
- ◀ Build a small house as soon as possible. Move into it even though it's not quite ready.
- ◀ Find out where you can buy food. Remember, the food you brought from home will soon be gone.
- ◀ Find feed for your animals.

#### d. Getting Settled

- ◀ Look for more building wood.
- ◀ Plant a garden. Plough up some land near your house even though the soil is as dry as a stone. Plant your seeds. Do not forget to water your garden every day.
- ◀ Don't waste any food. What you brought has to last until your garden grows and you learn to buy food in Mexico.
- ◀ Learn to eat and cook Mexican food such as tortillas and beans.
- ◀ As soon as possible, plant **crops** such as corn or wheat. You will need feed for your animals. You also need to sell grain to earn money. Your crops will do both for you.
- ◀ Get the children back into school. Build a school in the middle of the village as soon as you can manage it.
- ◀ Meet for church in the school on Sundays.
- ◀ Build a separate church as soon as you can manage that.
- ◀ Once you are settled and can afford it, build a larger house and also a barn.
- ◀ Watch how the Mexicans do things and learn from them. For example, learn to build with *adobe*\* instead of wood.
- ◀ Be ready for some hard times when they come and don't give up.

## 4 THREE COLONIES, ONE EXAMPLE

In this reader you will find stories about the Manitoba Colony in Chihuahua, Mexico. The colony was named after the province in Canada where the people came from. Right next to Manitoba Colony was Swift Current Colony. It was named after the Mennonite Settlement in Saskatchewan, Canada, where the Swift settlers came from. South of Chihuahua is the state of Durango. Here Mennonites opened a third colony. This group came from Hague, Saskatchewan. They named their colony Hague but it was usually called Durango Colony. Each colony had different experiences. They were also similar in many ways. The Manitoba colony stories that are told in

---

\* From Spanish, pronounced ah-DOE-be, bricks made of mud and straw.

this reader are an example. They show how the first Mennonite colonies got started in Mexico.

## THIS MIGHT ALSO INTEREST YOU . . .

# What Makes a Colony a Good Colony?

Life on a colony was meant to be simple. Making money and getting rich was not important. **Unity**, living together peacefully, was important. When people disagreed they had to work out the problem. This was not always easy.

A good colony had good leaders. The leaders were elected by the people. Good leaders made good decisions about life on the colony.

As well, every adult had to do their part to make colony life work. Once they chose their leaders the people had to support them. Parents also had to make sure their children had good teachers. Good teachers taught well and treated the children well. Parents and teachers needed to guide their children wisely. Children grew quickly into youth. Once they were youth, they learned to become responsible adult villagers.

To make sure their colony was a good place to live, villagers had to co-operate with each other. They did not **compete** and try to be better than others. The leaders had to work with the people in co-operating. Together they made sure that there

was food, money and land for everyone. No one should work to get rich but everyone should have enough.

Good leaders encouraged people to have a **common purpose** of living together in this way. They used the example of the first Christians, who lived simply and worked together. They shared what they had with others so that all had enough.

When the people of a colony had (1) a common purpose, (2) wise godly leaders who made good decisions together with the people, and (3) adults and young people who cared for each other, then life on the colony was very good. The people were content.









# Departure

## CHAPTER TWO



## PROLOGUE LIFE IS A WALKING STICK

Their minister said: *Das Leben ist ein Wanderstab*. Life is a walking stick. The minister's name was Minister Isaak Dyck but the people respectfully called him Ohm Iezak\* in *Plautdietsch*, Low German.

---

\* Pronounced owe'm EE-zahk.



In German *wander* means to go for a hike, a long walk. *Wander* can also mean a journey. Ohm Iezak was thinking about the Hebrews in the Old Testament. The Hebrews went on a walk that took them forty years. They walked from Egypt, where they were slaves, to Canaan, where they were free. Canaan was their promised land.

Ohm Iezak was also thinking about Menno Simons. Menno lived in the 1500s, about 500 years ago, in the Netherlands. He was a leader of the first Mennonites in Europe. Menno didn't walk or wander because he wanted to. He had to move from place to place to save his life. Menno followed a new Christian faith that was very different from what the old state church taught. In the 1500s, going against the state church was against the law. If Menno stayed in one place too long, he would be caught and put in prison. Once in prison, he would likely have been killed.

When Ohm Iezak talked about a walking stick, he was also remembering his people's forebears. They had wandered from Russia to Manitoba, Canada, about fifty years earlier. In Canada they had found freedom to live their Mennonite faith, the way they understood it. That freedom had suddenly come to an end.

The year was 1922 and Ohm Iezak was thinking about that end. The minister, his wife and children, and their community were moving to a new homeland. Ohm Iezak and his people were Old Colony Mennonites. These people understood what the minister meant by a walking stick. They knew all these stories about long walks. They also knew what their minister meant when he said that life was a walking stick. Like the groups who had lived before them, they were on a journey. They were moving to Mexico so that they could keep their Old Colony Christian faith. Maybe Mexico would be their promised land.

### **Menno Simons**

**Menno Simons** was an Anabaptist Christian leader. Anabaptists later took on Menno's name and were called Mennonites.

## 1 A HARD DECISION

Building a colony in a new land was an adventure. There were ever more new things to see and experience. There were always more new jobs to do. But deciding to leave Canada had been hard. In Canada the rules for Mennonites had changed. If parents stayed in Canada, their children would have to go to **public**, government schools. Their own village schools were being closed. Parents were afraid that English would become the children's language. They worried that their people would move out of their villages to their own farms. Their children would take on worldly ways of thinking. They might become selfish people who lived for themselves and did not care about each other. They might even forget their loving Heavenly Father.

Those who decided to move felt sad. They could not stop thinking about those who were staying in Canada. These others said it was not necessary to move. They said they would keep their faith even if things changed in Canada. Families and neighbours disagreed with each other. Some got angry. Others were afraid. They did not know what to think about making such a big move.

Children had to say goodbye to their cousins and friends. They would miss each other very much. Their parents would miss the adults they had argued with. Would all be forgiven? Would they be friends again once everything was settled?

## 2 LAND

Finding a new land to move to took a long time. For three years, the Old Colony Mennonites in Canada had looked for land. They had searched all over, in the United States, Argentina, Brazil, Quebec and finally in Mexico. This gave the people a lot of time to think and worry. They had to wait until September 19, 1921. On that day a telegram arrived from El Paso, Texas. This city was right on the border of Chihuahua, Mexico. The telegram came from a group of men who had been looking for land in Mexico.

It said:



The men had found exactly the land they were looking for. They had just bought the land. The deal was made in El Paso, Texas.

Here is the story of how the Mennonites found their land in Chihuahua, Mexico.

### 3 SIX DELEGATES CHOSEN

After looking far and wide for land, news came that there might be land to buy in Mexico. When the people heard the news, they took action. They chose six men to travel to Mexico. These men were their **delegates**. They did their work **on behalf of**, for, the people. The delegates were: Klaas Heide, Cornelius Rempel, Minister Julius Loewen, Minister Johann Loepky, Benjamin Goertzen and Teacher David Rempel.

Right after New Year, the delegates set out on their journey. On March 13 they were back home with good news. They also came home with many stories to tell. They had had adventures they could never have dreamed of as boys. On their journey, the delegates were never sure if they would actually find land. They were never sure if they would all come back home safely.

Today we are fortunate that David Rempel kept a diary on the trip. Here

are parts from Rempel's diary that describe the journey.<sup>1</sup> As you read the journal, you can follow the delegates' journey on the map on page 18.

## 4 DAVID REMPEL'S DIARY

**JANUARY 24, 1921** From the village of Rosenfeld (in Manitoba), we took the train to Winnipeg.

**JANUARY 25** In Winnipeg we got passports. Had them stamped by the Mexican Consul. Cost: five dollars each. Bought train tickets to El Paso, Texas, USA.

**JANUARY 28** Arrived in El Paso at 1:00 p.m. Took a hotel.

**JANUARY 30** At 5:00 p.m. land agent J. F. Wiebe came with a translator. He brought a message of welcome from the Mexican president and the agriculture minister. They want us to settle in Mexico. Also got a telegram from a Mr. Enlow. He has land to show us in Mexico. He'll be waiting for us in Tucson\* (Arizona, USA).

**FEBRUARY 2** Tucson. At 10:00 a.m. the train arrived with Mr. Enlow. We drove in two cars to Nogales (Sonora). Walked across the border into Mexico.

**FEBRUARY 3** At 7:00 we took the train from Nogales. Went through mountains and very wide valleys. Land is dry, but with irrigation the apricot trees were covered with fruit. Went with Mr. Enlow to Hermosillo, Sonora, by train. He has 120,000 acres of land to sell. About ten sacks of gold were loaded on our train! Sacks the size of twenty-pound sugar sacks. No one was guarding the gold! Arrived at the port city of Guaymas.

**FEBRUARY 4** From Guaymas to Culiacán, Sinaloa.

**FEBRUARY 5** We looked at land with J. F. Wiebe, Enlow, D. Salas Lopez and a driver. Huge cactus trees, brush so high it was hard to see the cattle grazing there. Land dry and hard. Further north we saw irrigated land. It was covered in sugar cane and bananas, growing very well. Back at Guaymas by 6:00. It's the Carnival holiday. Music till late into the night on the streets.

**FEBRUARY 6** Guaymas. We slept well. Weather very comfortable. Carnival

---

\* Pronounced TOO·sun.



Pacific Ocean





## TRAVEL WITH THE DELEGATES . . .

. . . as they make their way from El Paso, Texas, to Mexico City. Use the excerpts from David Rempel's diary to guide you. The colours of the place names match pictures and places on the map.

Arrived in El Paso, Texas, by train from Winnipeg, Canada. Took a hotel in **EL PASO**. A Mr. Enlow is waiting for us in **TUCSON** to show us some land there.

Drove in two cars to **NOGALES**. Walked across the border into Mexico. Took the train from Nogales, across mountains to **HERMOSILLO**. Ten sacks of gold were loaded on the train. No one guarding the gold!

On to **GUAYMAS** and **CULIACÁN**. Land is covered in sugar cane and bananas, all growing well!

To **MAZATLÁN**, then **RUIZ**. Got hot water from a restaurant. Met a large pig lying on restaurant floor, eating corn. Took a side trip to **TUXPAN**, treated like honoured guests.

Up steep slopes by car to **TEPIC**. Women knee-deep in water washing clothes, rubbing them on a rock.

In **IXTLÁN** hired ten mules. Rode through high mountains at night. Could see lights of Ixtlán far below.

Arrived at **SAN MARCOS**. Caught the train to **GUADALAJARA**. Slept!

Arrived in **MEXICO CITY** and took a streetcar to the president's palace. The palace and cathedral are one great, costly glory.

We took a side trip to **DURANGO** to see some land. Liked what we saw.

*Gulf  
of  
Mexico*

Oaxaca

Veracruz

Tabasco

Chiapas

Roo

Camacho

still going. The fireworks sound like a war. People are dressed up like the devil. At the same time others are going to church. We feel *unheimlich*, uneasy here.

**FEBRUARY 7** Saw a piece of land to the east. Not suitable. On the return trip saw a leather factory owned by Germans. More fireworks in the evening.

**FEBRUARY 8** Left Culiacán for Mazatlán at 6:00 a.m. Many people on the street wearing masks, *mit Geschrei und Gehole* – shouting and hooting. The Carnival is here too. We can't get away from it.

**FEBRUARY 9** Walked along the harbour.

**FEBRUARY 10** Drove from Mazatlán to Ruiz through fruitful fields. Ate supper in a hotel. It had a straw roof and raw wood siding, open to the fresh air. It costs fifty cents to sleep here on a board frame with no blankets. So Heide, Goertzen and I slept in the train.

**FEBRUARY 11** Warm water comes out of the ground if you dig a hole here. Donkeys are used a lot in Mexico for riding. They also haul goods, even long boards and huge loads of firewood. I got hot water from a restaurant. There a large pig was lying on the restaurant floor, eating corn.

From Ruiz we went by car to Tuxpan. Were honoured like special guests by a land company. Drove toward Santiago and a *rancho* (small town) called Chilpa. Enlow showed us 300,000 acres at fifteen dollars per acre. Everything grows without irrigation here: tobacco, corn, beans and vegetables.

**FEBRUARY 12** At 8:00 Lopez, Heide, [Cornelius] Rempel and Goertzen drove to Tepic. The rest of us were to follow in a second car. By 12:00 our car had not yet arrived.

The car trip was slow. We saw women standing knee-deep in water. They were washing clothes by rubbing them on a rock. The climate here is bad for health. Finally got to Tepic at 8:00 p.m. A bad trip.

**FEBRUARY 13** At 5:30 a.m. we drove from Tepic up steep slopes. Passed an old volcano that had once spewed ash and stones. Got to Ixtlán at 4:00.

Hired ten mules to ride to San Marcos. Had to get to Marcos at 12:00 to catch the train to Mexico City. Left Ixtlán on mules at 7:00 p.m. Three hours later we could see the lights of Ixtlán far below and behind us. We kept going higher and ever higher. At 11:00 p.m. the moon set.

At midnight, at the top of a hill, [Cornelius] Rempel wanted to rest. Loewen and I stayed with him. The guide said we would find a rancho in

### Privilegium

The agreement between the Mennonites and the president of Mexico; the promises Mexico made to the Mennonites.

### Minister

A member of the government who has a special job and works closely with the president. For example, the minister of agriculture looks after farming in the country.

The word is the same as a minister in a church. The meaning is different.

an hour. Once Rempel was ready to go again we caught up with the others. Still no rancho. Rempel needed to rest again and I stayed with him. When we finally all got to the rancho we had been without food for ten hours. We had travelled day and night over rugged land. It was 5:00 a.m., almost light. We asked for hot water and cooked our coffee.

**FEBRUARY 14** Left for San Marcos at 7:00 a.m. Now we could see how dangerous the cliffs, and how deep the **abysses**, the gorges, were. This is where we had come in the dark last night. At one point we had been on a narrow path, right at the edge of a steep cliff.

Lopez sent word ahead to hold our train. When we got to the station, Goertzen and Loewen were not there! They had got lost. Finally they arrived. We left by train and slept. Arrived in Guadalajara at 5:00.

**FEBRUARY 15** Awoke rested. Legs hurt. Went to the market in the morning. Beautiful fresh vegetables. Prices in the shop windows were low. Cotton cloth for ten cents a metre.

**FEBRUARY 16** Arrived in Mexico City at 10:00.

**FEBRUARY 17** Got to the president's palace at 9:00 p.m. We had already met the **minister of agriculture**. The minister and Arturo Braniff, who was the president's brother-in-law, drove us to the palace. There we met the president. Loewen explained what we needed. We discussed every one of our points.

Regarding schools, we can have German schools but would later need to learn Spanish. After we explained our experience in Canada, the president said he was impressed with us. Lopez heard him say they wanted people like us in their land. He also heard him say that they would not bother us about learning Spanish.

All this took 1½ hours. Then Minister Loeppky spoke to the president. With tears in his eyes he said, “We will always be in debt to the president and the minister of agriculture. Your friendly hospitality and the freedoms you have promised will never be forgotten. Mexico will be a highly praised land for us. We had a better welcome here than anywhere else.” We all shook hands warmly.

**FEBRUARY 18** At 10:30 a.m. we went by streetcar to the president’s palace. A servant showed us the great chambers. The palace was one great, costly *Pracht*, glory. On the second floor we saw the bedrooms of the president, the first lady, and their daughter. A small flower garden on the second floor had more than a hundred kinds of flowers and roses in it. At 5:00 we spoke with Arturo Braniff, who had a lot of land to sell.

**FEBRUARY 19** We thought we would get our *Privilegium* today. But we were disappointed. It was not to our satisfaction. We worked with the *Privilegium* for a whole week before it was ready.

End of Diary

## A Left-Handed President

The delegates wondered about the president, when he signed their precious *Privilegium* with his left hand! Their children had to learn to write with their right hand, even if they were left-handed. That rule did not seem to apply to the president of Mexico.

## 5 A LAND DEAL

While waiting for the *Privilegium*, the delegates went to see some more land in Durango State. Later Mennonites from Hague, Saskatchewan, bought this land to be their colony.

By March 12, the delegates were back home in Canada. They had not yet bought any land, but they *had* got the *Privilegium*. This agreement with the president of Mexico promised exactly what the Mennonites had asked for. They could live together on colonies in Mexico. They could worship God in their own churches. Children could learn their lessons in German in their own village schools.



Finding the right land in Mexico took two trips. This picture was taken in June 1921, on trip two. The Canadians are sitting down for lunch on land in the Bustillos Valley in Chihuahua. This time the land was exactly right and they bought it.

As soon as they were home, the delegates reported to the church. Then some of them travelled back to Mexico to buy land. On September 19, 1921, they sent back the exciting news. The land had been bought. Klaas Heide made the final land deal in El Paso, Texas. The two land agents were Charles Newman and John F. D. Wiebe from Herbert, Saskatchewan.

The delegates divided up the land into two colonies: one for Manitoba and the other for the Mennonites in Swift Current, Saskatchewan. When all was settled, each family decided how much land they wanted to buy on their new colony. They put down \$2.25 per acre. That made it theirs.

## 6 THE HARDEST PART WAS SELLING THE LAND

### VIGNETTE

## Lena and Frauns

#### Manitoba, Canada, 1921

It was a good thing that Mother always had *Tweebak* and *Soppsel*<sup>\*</sup> (buns and jam) waiting for them when they came home from school. Lena and Frauns had had another hard day at school in their Mennonite village in Manitoba. They had again argued with their friends about Mother's land. Every day they came home with empty stomachs and **agitated**, troubled minds. "I wish we could just go to Mexico, now! I wish we could leave everyone else behind and go by ourselves. Why do we have

---

\* Pronounced TV'EYE·bock, SUP·sul.

to listen to everyone else?" Frauns asked, his anger suddenly burning.

Lena agreed. Today her good friend Maria had criticized Lena's parents. Not in so many words, but Lena knew what Maria meant. Maria thought Lena's parents were stubborn, that they didn't want to co-operate with the village and the church. That was more than Lena could take. Her parents were not greedy or selfish or proud! They just wanted to get a good price for their land.

In any case, it was Mother's land. She had **inherited**, got, it from Lena's grandparents. Grandparents had cultivated it and made it yield its first crops. As if reading Lena's mind, Frauns said, "Father took that land and made it produce." Just because his family didn't have land, didn't mean he didn't know how to farm. That's what Father always said.

"He isn't doing anything wrong," said Lena.

"Exactly," said Frauns. "If he wants to sell it now, not wait to let others sell it, that's his business!"

And so ended their **tirade**, their outburst. Mother had just come in from outside. Frauns and Lena knew very well that Mother did not allow such talk about their neighbours. Father didn't want his children to stir up a quarrel with the neighbours either. It was a good thing Frauns and Lena had each other. These were difficult days for everyone. Sometimes these two just *had to say* it like it was.

Selling farms and land in Canada was one of the hardest things about moving to Mexico. Each group organized this job in a different way. In Swift Current, Saskatchewan, they did it one way. In Hague, Saskatchewan, they did it another way. In Manitoba the people used yet another plan.

This is how the leaders of the Manitoba group decided to sell their land. Everyone was expected to move to Mexico. All the land would be sold

to one new owner. It looked as if they would get about seventy-five dollars an acre. The money from the sale would be divided among all the families, according to how much land each family had sold. In this way the whole group would stay together. No one would have to worry about selling their own land. No one would be left with unsold land. The money from the land would be used to pay for the land in Mexico.

The reasons made sense, but the plan didn't work out. First, it was hard to sell the land in one piece. By the time they should have been packing, the land still wasn't sold! Then the price of land went down. As they hunted for a buyer, the people saw the price go lower and lower. When it went down from \$75.00 to \$12.50 per acre families were very worried. How low would the price go?

Some simply couldn't wait. They went ahead and sold their own farm. Soon others followed their example. These were difficult days for everyone. They were also hard for the leaders. Their job was to guide people in co-operating. If their plan was to work, everyone would have to work together. This time their plan failed. The disagreements were too strong. In the end many families sold their own farms.

It's not surprising that things didn't go as planned. It's not surprising that people got impatient and disagreed. It's not surprising that they became anxious and quarrelsome. Moving to Mexico was a very difficult job. It was not possible to get everything right.



Then suddenly, it seemed, it was time to go. There was no more time for arguing. One writer described it like this:

Once it was time to pack up, the details of deciding were behind them. The families now faced a big new problem. While they were waiting for their land to sell, the *Beeza Yeist*\* (Bad Spirit) had a time of it, getting people to quarrel, making their hearts heavy. Then his turn was over. His time was up. He could not overcome the Good.<sup>2</sup>

---

\* Pronounced BYE-zah yeyst.



## THIS MIGHT ALSO INTEREST YOU . . .

### Mother's Land

Why did Frauns say it was mother's land? Wasn't it the family's land? Why was it important that she **inherited**, got the land, from her parents? The answer goes back about 400 years. In Europe in the 1600s, Mennonites divided up their land in a certain way when the parents died. Each of the children, the daughters and the sons, got the same amount of land. In Russia in the 1800s, this rule was called the *Waisenordnung* (orphan's rule). In Canada and Mexico Mennonites followed the same rule. If a mother or a father died, one of the village men decided what the land was worth and wrote down the amount. Half of this amount was given to the children, divided evenly among all of them. When one parent died the one left behind usually married again. It was important that the children got their piece of the land before they got a new step-parent. The land was kept for the children until they were twenty-one years old. At that time they could start using the land as their own.

This system worked well on colonies. It meant that land was divided into small pieces. No one family owned a large piece of land. No one could become a lot richer than everyone else. Also, both sons and daughters got their share of land. When the children married, they brought their land into the marriage. If a young man from a poor family, without land, married a young woman from a family with land, the new husband could get a start as a farmer. This is what happened with Lena and Frauns's parents. Their mother brought her land to the marriage. In such cases the husband often worked together

with his wife's family. Families farmed together.

Sharing land and working the farm together made strong families. Strong families made strong communities. Dividing up the land kept farms small. This made it easier to keep everyone working together. Moving to a new country and new colony could only work if the people knew how to work together.

Dividing up the land among many children meant that farmers had to always be thinking about land for their children. Finding and buying new land was part of Old Colony Mennonite farming lifestyle. Everyone understood that they might have to move and start up again on new land. If all their children were to have land, someone eventually had to move.<sup>3</sup>

## VIGNETTE

# Helena and Franz

They had done it! Yes! Franz, aged thirty-three, was waiting to fork hay into the manger for his cows. The cattle car on the train looked just like a barn inside. But under Franz's feet the train was swaying from side to side, like some kind of a boat. In a few minutes the engineer would stop the train for chore time. Then Franz would get to work. He would hardly notice that he was in a train. He would almost forget that this train was taking him far away from his farm in Canada.

The last six months had been hard. Then in the end, everything had worked out. Franz and Helena, his wife, had sold their farm just in time. It was a good farm, easily worth what they got. They were a good pair, he and Helena. His wife had a head for numbers and Franz, well he just knew how to farm. It was in his blood. How farming had got into his blood he didn't know. It didn't come from his father. Pa had never had a farm of his own. He had always worked for a boss, sometimes here, sometimes there. If it hadn't been for Helena's eighty acres Franz would likely be doing the same.

And now that good farm they had built together was sold. Thanks be to God. Franz had been ready to give up. They would just have to "give it away," sell it for very little money. In the end Helena's father stepped in to help. Well, Helena had stepped in. She urged her father to follow up on one more buyer. And this time it happened. The interested buyer **put down the cash**, paid. The farm was sold.

\* \* \*

In the passenger car, Helena was digging through the food box, getting out breakfast. As soon as the train stopped, she would be able to work faster. Franz would be back soon, and Lena and Frauns would come with fresh milk. Those two were good children. They were happy again, eager to get to Mexico. Tears had flowed when the train left Manitoba, but not for those two. They were glad to be going.

Selling the farm was hard on them. Helena knew that her oldest two had a lot to say about how clumsy the land sales seemed. Helena had heard bits of their conversations. She heard enough to know that selling their farm, without waiting for the group to sell it, had made their children unpopular at school.

## 7 OUR MEXICO STORYTELLER

Isaak Dyck was one of the ministers who led the people from Canada to Mexico. In 1933 in Mexico, Minister Dyck became the *Ältester*\* of the Manitoba Colony. As *Ältester* he was the leader of the church and colony for many years. The people called their *Ältester* Ohm Iezak.

Later in his life, Ohm Iezak wrote his **autobiography**, his life story. Ohm Iezak was a strong leader and also a good storyteller. Many of the stories in this reader are based on Ohm Iezak's autobiography.

## 8 WILL WE EVER SEE YOU AGAIN?

At noon on the first day of March 1922, the first *Auswanderungs*† train left from Plum Coulee, Manitoba. On March 2 the second train departed from Haskett, Manitoba. On March 7 the third train left, and on March 11 the fourth, then one more train in March, both from Haskett. During this time, two trains also left for Mexico from Swift Current, Saskatchewan.

All the trains arrived safely in San Antonio, Mexico, during the first half of the month of March. Here the trains were unloaded and all the goods were taken to the village lot that each family had chosen.

Ohm Iezak Dyck and his friend Ohm Frauns Loewen were on the second train. For these leaders the winter of 1921 had flown by. It had seemed impossible to look after every little thing in time.

Ohm Iezak wrote:

It was the second of March that we left, on a beautiful morning. The train was ready to go. The cars had all been loaded. Many friends and relatives had come to say goodbye. Loading the train went quickly because there were so many willing hearts and kind

---

\* Pronounced EL-test-er.

† Pronounced AUSS-von-der-oonk. *Auswanderung* means emigrating, moving away from.

hands to help. Then the day of departure was suddenly at the door. Before the cars were loaded, we gathered in the schoolhouse in Blumenfeld. There we had a farewell service, for the last time. We

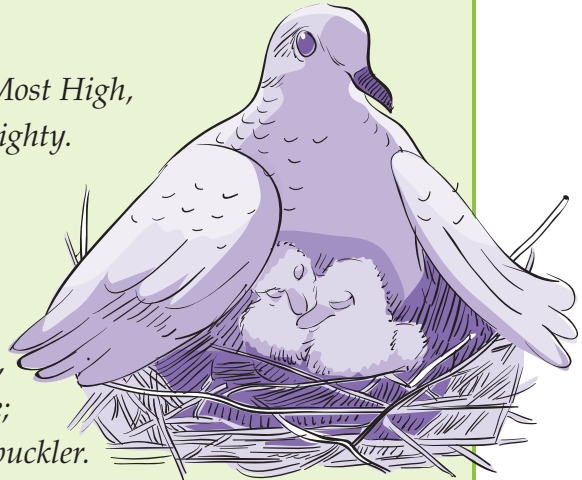
## TO THINK ABOUT . . .

### Psalm 91

The passengers on the train going to Mexico were Christian believers. They had faith that God would protect them. Words from the Old Testament comforted them. The words in this psalm are an example:

*You who dwell in the shelter of the Most High,  
shall abide in the shadow of the Almighty.  
I will say of the Lord, "My refuge  
and my fortress; my God,  
in whom I trust."*

*God will cover you with his feathers,  
under his wings you will find refuge;  
God's truth will be your shield and buckler.*



*You will not fear the terror of the night, or the arrow that flies  
by day, or the pestilence that walks in darkness, For God will give  
his angels charge over you, to guard you in all your ways.*

*Those who love me, I will deliver; I will protect those who know  
my name. When they call upon me, I will answer them; I will be  
with them in trouble, I will rescue them and honour them.*

asked God for his presence and protection in the **hugely complicated**, very difficult journey.

For me it was no small matter to leave the Fatherland. I had loved this land so much. It was my birthplace, where my cradle had stood. With a lot of *Kummer*, sorrow, we left as the tears flowed. We did not know if we would ever see each other again: our friends, parents and brothers and sisters. Yet I can remember only good from God's side, in my life as a poor, weak and also sinful servant. And then . . . <sup>4</sup>

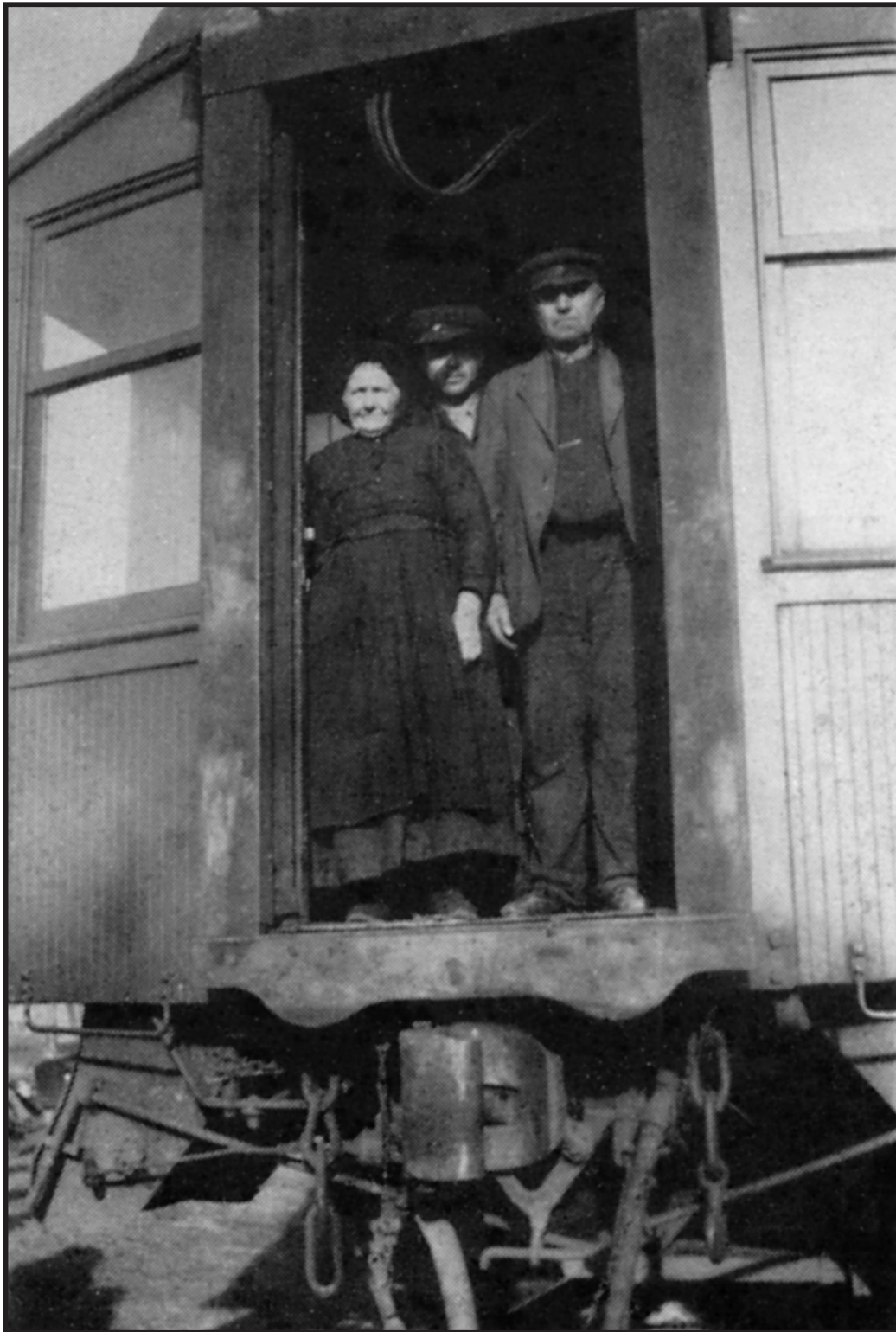
Time to go! The engineer gave the signal to start. "All Aboard!" boomed the conductor's voice. It was eight o'clock in the morning. Slowly and carefully the train began to move out of the station. The passengers inside were quiet, saying very little. They had just said "goodbye," maybe forever. They were leaving the land of their birth, their homeland, Manitoba, Canada. Ohm Iezak prayed:

O Lord, be merciful. Keep us and look on us and all our people with grace. Take us safely through this journey. Protect us and keep us from harm on this journey.

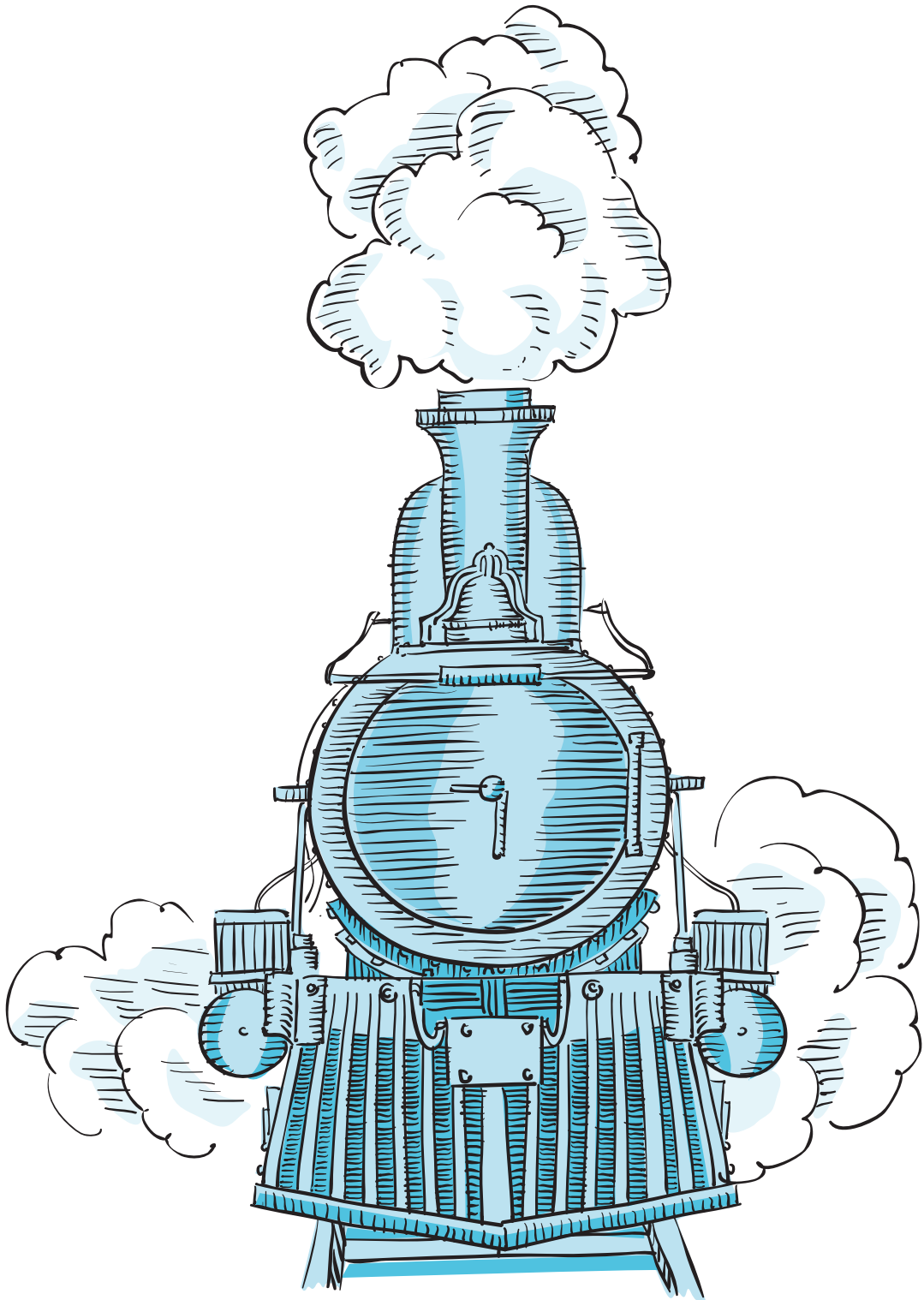
Ohm Iezak stood by the window to look one last time at his house, his yard and his land. He had not yet sold his land. He wondered how that would work out. The train passed first one village, then another and another until all were **out of sight**, gone. Very soon they were at the border. When all their papers had been examined the train took its passengers into the United States.

## 9 FAST, FASTER, FASTEST!

Now that the train was ready to begin its long journey it could go at top speed. Fast, faster and still faster. "Wheeee!" The children's tummies jumped. They had never gone this fast in any horse-drawn buggy. This train had



Seeing their home for the last time, from the back door of their train in Manitoba, Canada.





two powerful locomotives. It could travel around seventy to ninety-five kilometres per hour (a horse and buggy goes between seven and fifteen kilometres per hour). Not everyone felt the children's excitement. Many were **terrified**, very afraid especially as darkness fell. The train raced with a **shrieking**, loud roaring, into the dark night. Many prayed that they would arrive safely.

Finally some of the men spoke to the engineer. They asked him to please go a little bit slower. They were afraid for their cattle, **jostling**, being pushed around in the cattle cars. The answer they got did not take away their fear. The engineer, who didn't look the least bit worried, said, "The responsibility of the trains is ours, not yours." The men felt even less comfortable when he added, "We made a bet that we could get you to Mexico in the shortest time possible. If we lose our bet, we lose the honour of our company."

## 10 TRUST IN GOD AND ENJOY THE VIEW

So the passengers could not do anything about the speed of the train. They could only place themselves in the hands of their God. King David in the Bible had also been terrified in his life. He wrote: "O Gott, schaffe uns Beistand in der Not, denn Menschenhilfe is kein Nütze" (O God, stand by us in this hard time, for human help is useless, Psalm 61:12).

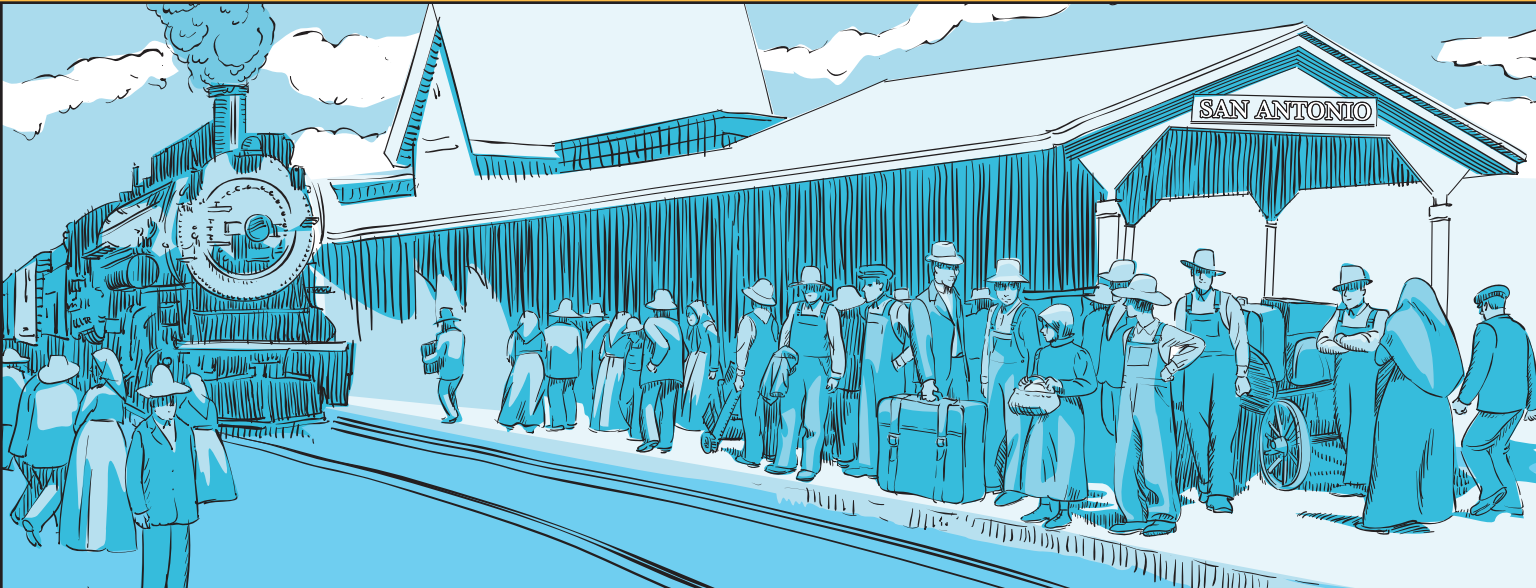
Once they got used to the speed, the travellers enjoyed the view. Here in the United States it was already spring. Everything was green. Fruit trees were blooming. The winter wheat was growing, bright green.





# Arrival

## CHAPTER THREE



### 1 WHAT HAVE WE DONE?

After four days their train pulled into the station in El Paso, Texas. South of El Paso was Mexico. They had reached the border of their new home. This border was very different from the one they crossed at the start of their journey. The travellers were not ready for what they saw.

The children had entertained themselves on the train. They had tried

hard to be patient on the long trip. Now they saw a change in their parents. Were Mother and Father afraid? Could that be? Even the ministers, Ohm Iezak and Ohm Frauns, looked very serious.

The train had come to the Mexican border. It was just a border but when they crossed it, their whole world changed. What had they got themselves into? What had they done? Ohm Iezak wrote:

We felt like the children of Israel when they arrived at the land of Canaan: *erschrocken*, shocked. Those long-ago travellers had said, “We do not dare to enter [this land] because they are too strong for us. This land eats up its people.” (Numbers 13)

Suddenly everything was new. First, their English-speaking engineers were replaced by Mexican engineers. Second, hundreds of dark-skinned, curious people pressed against their train, staring. The pale-skinned children inside the train stared back. They simply could not keep their eyes off the strangers. They had never seen people like this before.

While the children looked and wondered, their parents were thinking: These people will be our neighbours. We will live among them. Will we ever feel at home in this country?

Just then twenty soldiers carrying rifles **boarded**, got on the train. They had come to protect the train from robbers. The children turned their faces from the window to the soldiers. Some were excited. Others were frightened by the uniforms, the brown faces, the black eyes and especially of the rifles and the rows of bullets in the soldiers’ belts.

There was also one good thing about crossing the border. The train moved much more slowly. And! when the soldiers introduced themselves they turned out to be friendly people. They were easy to get to know.

## 2 DID GOD REALLY CREATE THIS DEAD LAND?

This is what Ohm Iezak and the rest of the travellers saw after they crossed

the border:

As soon as we entered Mexico it seemed that everything had died. The grass was completely dry. The cattle were wandering around looking miserable and thin. They were trying to satisfy their hunger by grazing dry corn stalks off the land. As we looked out across the desert, we reminded ourselves that our Creator had placed His border around every country. We were still in God's country.

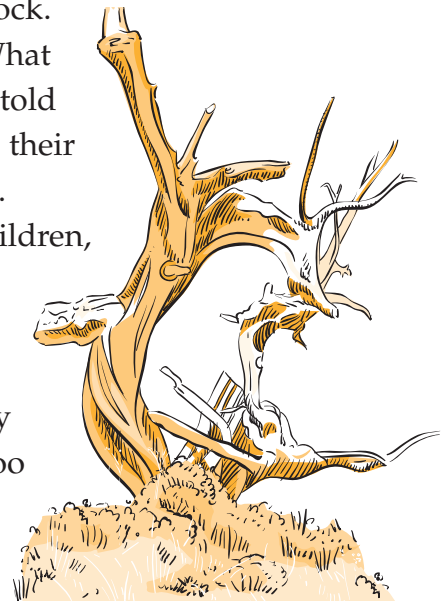
For one whole day and night the travellers saw nothing that looked alive. The train was very quiet. The adults wondered: Is all of Mexico like this? Surely once we get to our land, things will look much better. The trip from El Paso to Chihuahua City took a day and a night. In all that time they saw no sign that things would get better.

In Chihuahua City, the travellers had another shock. The train jerked and metal clanged against metal. What was that? When someone went to check, they were told that the train was being taken apart. The people and their goods would be pulled by two different locomotives.

There were mountains ahead. Mountains? The children, men and woman in the train came from the flat Manitoba prairie. They had only seen low hills in the distance, never mountains. The train attendant said the mountains were steep and the valleys deep. They would cross high bridges. Their train was much too long and heavy to get up those slopes. It had to be divided in two.

Ohm Iezak wrote:

After we left Chihuahua City we soon saw that what we had heard was true. In two hours we had crossed high iron bridges. We had travelled along steep walls of rock. Then we drove so close to these walls that it felt exactly as if the mountain would fall down on us. We entered our first tunnel. It was completely dark. It felt as if the mountain would break. From here we climbed mountains so



steep that our train, even with all the steam power from its boiler, could barely move. It felt as if the train, with all of us inside, would slide backwards, tip and fall to the ground far below. Then, on the steepest **incline**, hill, of all, our train stopped.

Some of the women started crying, and their babies too. The men were silent, but not without fear. Why had no one told them that this would happen? Why hadn't this trip been planned better? If this powerful train couldn't make it through these mountains, how would mere weak people be able to live in this land?

And then it was over. The train was back on more level ground. The high mountains were behind them. Before them lay a wide open plain, the Bustillos Valley of Chihuahua, Mexico. They had arrived at their new home. Ohm Iezak reminded the people of these words:



The travellers crossed dry “dead” land and travelled along high mountain cliffs. Then, suddenly, they came to a wide open valley and a train station called San Antonio. They had arrived at their new home.

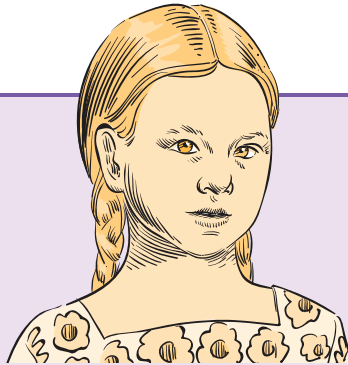
It was as the poet said: “Oder Aber! Christus hilft selbst, steht bei in unmögliche Dingen, und bauet Stuf auf Stuf zum Himmel einzudringen. Da ist kein Berg zu hoch, kein Lak zu tief gelegt, was man nich übersteigt, wenn Gott uns stärkt und trägt” (Either or! Christ himself helps, stands by through impossible things, building step by step, a path for us to heaven. There is no mountain so high, or lake so deep that can overcome us if we are carried and strengthened by God).

They had come to the end of their journey, safely through the mountains. Right behind them was the second train with their animals and goods safely inside.

### 3 THE TOWN

#### VIGNETTE

## Estela



Estela opened her eyes. The sun was up and shining into the tiny window of the family’s bedroom. Their small adobe house had two rooms: the bedroom and the front room. Estela woke to the flap slap, flap slap, flap slap of her mother making tortillas. Mother fried the tortillas on their stone oven. The oven was built into the corner of the front room. A pot of *frijoles*,\* beans was already bubbling at the back of the oven.

\* Pronounced free-HOE-lees.

Now wide awake, Estella remembered the amazing news she heard yesterday. A train, loaded with people from Canada, was parked at the train station. These people had brought unbelievably much stuff: horses, cows, lumber, farm equipment, wagons. There were also many children.

Today Estela was going to run over there and see what was going on. As soon as she had eaten her tortillas and beans she'd be off. San Antonio wasn't far and, lucky for her, she was the youngest in the family. She had no baby brother or sister to lug with her. If she ran all the way, she'd be there in twenty minutes.

Ohm Iezak continues his story:

At sunrise we arrived at our new home, San Antonio de los Arenales. All of us were glad that the complicated journey had been successful. But we were very disappointed. The town we had come to had only a train station, a couple of broken down houses, and the **dilapidated**, rundown Immigration House. That building was almost falling down. There were a few very small shops and a tiny humble earthen hut. This hut was supposed to be the post office! And that was the whole town. As well, we saw many stones in the town and also on our land. It seemed the soil was completely dead.

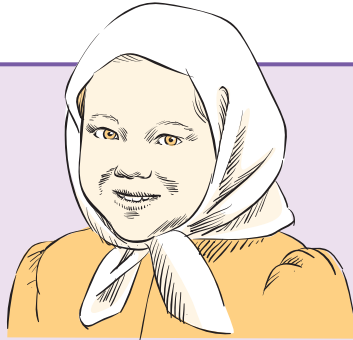
## 4 GET THOSE TRAINS UNLOADED! WE HAVE TWO DAYS

The new immigrants had little time to stop and think. They had two days to unload their box and cattle cars. After that the train would take off, back to the United States border.



## VIGNETTE

## Sarah



Sarah was the youngest in her family. She had promised to stay put, in one place, until Mother called her. And that's what she did. Sarah knew how to obey her parents. Everyone else in her family was moving about.

The sun was blazing into Sarah's eyes. She had never seen a sun this bright. The day was warm. Her dress felt hot and sticky. All she could see was people, people and more people, moving about. They were unloading the train, shouting orders and squeezing their way through the crowd.

A circle of brown-skinned people had gathered round to watch. The men and boys were starting to help with the unloading. Sarah sat down to watch and wait for Mother to call. Then she saw a girl, about her age, with brown skin and black hair, watching her. Sarah looked back at the girl.

\* \* \*

Estela saw a white-skinned girl. The girl was wearing a large white kerchief decorated with colourful flowers. The kerchief almost covered her face. She was wearing a long dress. Estela smiled at the girl. Sarah smiled back.

"Sarah!" That was Mother calling. No more time to smile at the stranger. Sarah ran to help set out the morning *Faspa*, coffee break. Father and her brothers and sisters had been working since the sun came up. Sarah now handed them slices of bread spread with jam. Mother poured cups of hot black coffee. The workers closed their eyes and thanked God silently for the food. Then, with no need to speak, they laid into the food.

In Canada there had been people all around to help load trains. Here everyone had to look after themselves. Ohm Iezak wondered how he would get his goods off the train in time. His children were still small. The trains were surrounded by strong-looking Mexican men. It was clear that they wanted to help. But Ohm Iezak didn't speak a word of Spanish and the men looked very dark. At that moment, he wished that these men and all the other strangers crowding around the train were far away!

Suddenly a couple of big young men came striding toward him. They pushed their way into his train car and grabbed a couple of items. Ohm Iezak just looked at them. He felt dumb and stupid. Finally the men each held up one finger in the air. With the other hand they pointed to the sunrise and then to the sunset. This was to say that they would work from morning till evening for one peso.

Ohm Iezak decided to take them on. The young men started immediately, unloading crates and singing as they went along. God had provided help for the impossible job of unloading the train alone. When the two days were up, all his goods were unloaded. After they got paid, the young men thanked Ohm Iezak and were on their way.

## 5 NIGHT FALLS EARLY IN MEXICO

With goods loaded and cattle safely tied to the wagons, the settlers began the slow trip to their village sites. Ohm Iezak's group was headed twenty-eight kilometres north to the Rosengart Village Plan. There they would set up their tent village. As soon as possible they would fall into bed.

While they were still far from their site, night fell. In Manitoba in March, night gave them plenty of warning. In Chihuahua darkness fell suddenly. Once the sun dropped behind the mountains it was dark. The young children began to cry and fuss. The cattle were tired. They had never walked this far before. Maybe it was time to stop for the night and sleep under their wagons. But what about the mothers with babies in their laps? The night would be too cold for the babies. They would keep going.

The children shivered. "Spooky, spooky, spook," shouted one of the girls.

“Boo!” yelled a boy right into her ear.

“Settle down!” threatened a Mother. That was hard to do. They had never travelled out in the fresh air with so much darkness all around them. They had never before been up this late, but by eleven o’clock they had settled. They were fast asleep in the wagon boxes when they arrived at “Village Rosengart.”

With all hands on the job, the tents went up. Then, completely exhausted and worn to the bone, the Rosengarters lay down to sleep. As they fell asleep, it was as if they heard a voice speaking to them, words they had learned as children in school:

I will lay me down in peace and sleep, for you alone, O Lord, make me to lie down in safety. (Psalm 4:9)

The Psalmist who wrote these words knew what it was like to sleep outdoors in a strange land. He had written this prayer to remind himself that he did not need to be afraid.



First the Mennonites unloaded the horses and wagons they had brought from Canada in their train. Then they were ready to travel by caravan to their land.

## Horses Have Feelings Too

Ohm Iezak loved horses and he hated to see them suffer. He wrote:

Most of all our horses suffered. Many of them were under the open sky, tied to the wagon. They were there in rain, storm, snow, frost and heat.

In the daytime they sweated. At night they had to stand in the cold by the wagons at eight degrees below freezing.

Our horses had to make the trips to and from town to get all of our supplies. It was a wonder and a pity to watch them. As we hitched them up to empty wagons, the horses were happy, fresh and ready to go, the whole way to town. They must have thought they were on their way home, back in Canada.

Once the wagons were loaded for the return trip, the horses' heads drooped. They had no more energy. They knew there was no manger of hay waiting for them in this direction.

## 6 BREAKFAST HAS NEVER TASTED THIS GOOD

When they awoke, everything seemed strange. Where were they? Not in their train cars. Those cars had been warm. Then they remembered. They were out on the open prairie in tents. No one had thought that Mexico would be this cold. Now they knew that it could.

Ohm Iezak wrote:

The first thing we checked in the morning was the babies and little children. They were fine. We had brought along very small iron stoves. Soon these were lit and the coffee for our breakfast was boiling. Not everyone in the village had this equipment. Soon several neighbours were under our roof – that is, in our tent. We all sat flat on the ground. But I have to say, breakfast had not tasted this good to me for a long while.

## 7 MENNONITES MEET MEXICANS

Soon Mexicans came around to the tent villages. They were selling corn, firewood, hogs, horses, oxen and other goods. Buying goods is tricky when buyer and seller don't speak the same language. Some sellers took advantage of the newcomers. They cheated them and even stole from them. At other times they sold them back the stolen goods. A story is told about a settler who bought an ox from a Mexican. That night the ox's rope was cut and in the morning the ox was gone. It was said that the person who stole the ox was the same person who sold it. It's not surprising that the Mennonites were afraid of Mexicans at first.

There were also many better meetings. One of these meetings turned into a friendship.

Ohm Iezak wrote:

It took me about three weeks to move all our belongings to our land. Each time I came to town, one of the workers I had hired was waiting for me. He lifted his hat as soon as he saw me and hurried toward me. Each time we met he helped me with loading the heaviest goods. Then he would water my horses, drive with me part way, jump from the wagon and walk back home. Next time I came to town, he was at his post again. Of course I paid him a little for his work. I also shared with him the good meal my wife had sent along.

A long time later when we were living in a wooden house and



The first Mennonite villages in Mexico were rows of large tents.

didn't have to go to town anymore, we met this faithful worker again. He came riding to our house one day on a small horse. He had found out from others where we lived. We invited him to come in. While we visited, I realized that this young man was more than a helper. He was my friend.

## 8 SANDSTORMS, NOT SNOWSTORMS!

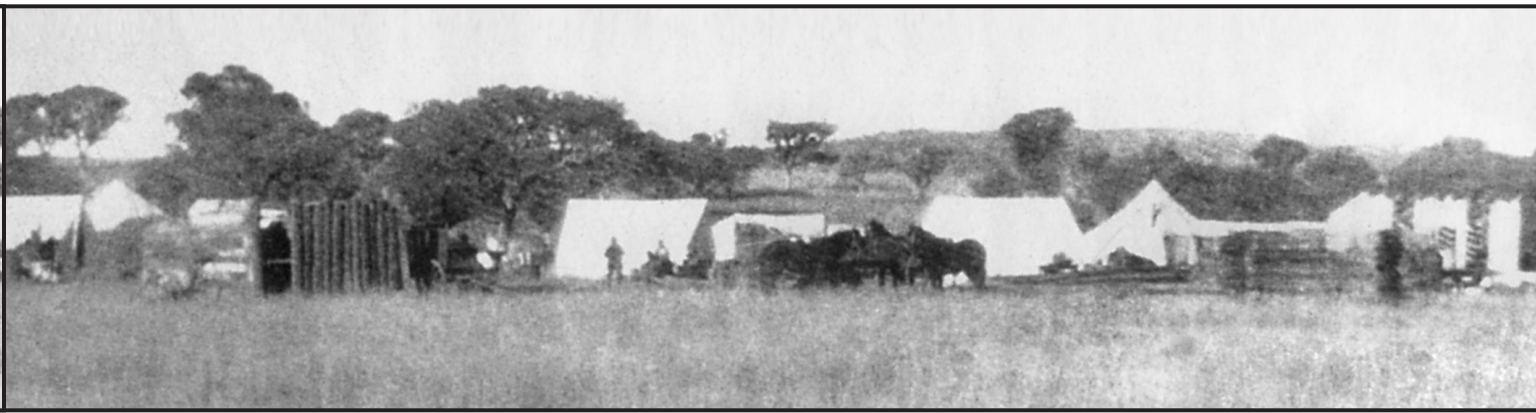
March and April is sand storm season in Chihuahua. Here is what happened during one fierce storm when Ohm Iezak was called to a funeral.

He wrote:

The funeral of Mrs. Johan Loewen was a very sad one. Digging her grave was especially hard. The earth was so hard we thought it would be impossible. Finally, with the great effort, two Mexicans dug the grave for us. They worked until noon.

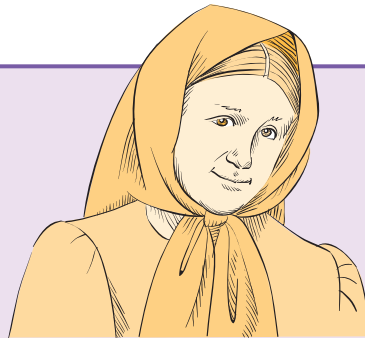
At the same time we had a terrible wind storm. We stood under the tent where the funeral was held. Would we be thrown up into the air together with the tent? I stood in the tent filled with fear, trying to give the sermon.

Suddenly the storm caught the top bar of the tent and dragged



## VIGNETTE

# Anna



The storm had blown itself out. The wind was quiet. Anna's four-month-old baby had finally fallen asleep. The three other young children were in the tent next door. Anna's younger sister Susan was playing with them. Thanks be to God for Susan, thought Anna. Susan was such a *Kjinja Frint*.\* She loved children. She played with them, put them to sleep when they were tired, **cajoled**, sweet-talked them when they were being fussy.

And thank God for her mother and father. Anna's parents were such **optimists**, always seeing the bright side. I guess I'm also *ne mootje Persoon*,† an optimistic person, thought Anna. I'm as tired as a dog from this dreadful wind, but I'm strong. And the storm did not tear our tent down. I'll get to work

\* Pronounced KYING·ah frint.

† Pronounced ne MOWT·yuh per·ZOWN.

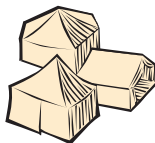
right now, she decided. She would clean this place. Sand and grit was everywhere. It had got in their beds, their clothes and even their food.

And what would she make to eat? *Tweebak, Soppsel, Schmaunt Kiiaken?*\* Buns, jam, cream cookies: Anna remembered the four-o'clock *Faspa*, lunch, that they always had in Canada. Well, there was none of that here. But she did have some Canadian coffee left. And their cow had made it safely through the storm. She was still giving milk. Anna would have cream in her coffee and the children would have milk to drink with their supper.

---

\* Pronounced TV'EYE·bock, SUP·sul, SHMOUNT COO·a·ken.

the whole tent along with it. It seemed that the bar would break and everything would **collapse**, fall down. Immediately several men grabbed the bar and held it up until the sermon was finished. The tent stayed standing. Many others had their tents torn down.









# First Things First

## CHAPTER FOUR



### 1 TAKING CARE OF LIFE'S NECESSITIES

The Mennonite pioneers were brave people. They did not expect life to be easy. They knew how to use their muscles. Besides hard work they also had to think and plan. They had to make sure they had the three **necessities of life**: shelter, water and food. They had brought tents for shelter. Water was the second necessity. Right after water came food.

## 2 WELLS AND WATER

Finding water was **urgent**, very important. Chihuahua had an **arid climate**, dry weather. In spring the creek beds were empty. The air was dry and the sun was fierce. Everyone felt thirsty all the time. At first they hunted for streams that gave them cold fresh water. Once the rain came in May, there was water in the creeks. As soon as possible they dug wells. Digging near a creek bed was best. There they found water close to the surface. Mexican men and boys knew how to work the hard soil. They were happy to dig wells. It was a good fit. The Canadians needed water and their Mexican neighbours wanted to earn money. Even so, digging the hard dirt felt like digging through stone.

## 3 FOOD AND FEED

Food was next. The Mennonites' first step was to learn to enjoy Mexican beans. Next they learned about corn flour. Mexican women could slap up dozens of corn flour tortillas in no time. Every morning, before their families were awake, these women were up frying tortillas. At the same time, Mennonite women and girls struggled to make some kind of bread with this strange Mexican flour. Their families had to learn to eat thin corn-flour pancakes.

Some things did not change when they left Canada. The hens they brought from Manitoba still laid eggs. There were also chickens for meat. Cows gave them milk. But long before the first year was over, every man, woman and child was very very tired of corn pancakes fried in lard. They longed for crusty, delicious, homemade bread, spread with butter and a thick layer of jam.

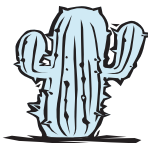
Feed for animals was almost as important as food for their families. Mexican cows were sent out to graze all winter. They found their own food. Mennonite cows were used to eating hay in a barn in winter. Here in Mexico the newcomers did not yet have hay, and in March there was little

grass to graze. The good farmers lay awake at night listening to their cows bawling with hunger. Many cows died of starvation in the first year.

As more Mennonites arrived from Canada, they brought along feed and other necessities for the new settlers in Mexico. These goods kept the people and most of their animals alive.

## 4 HOUSES

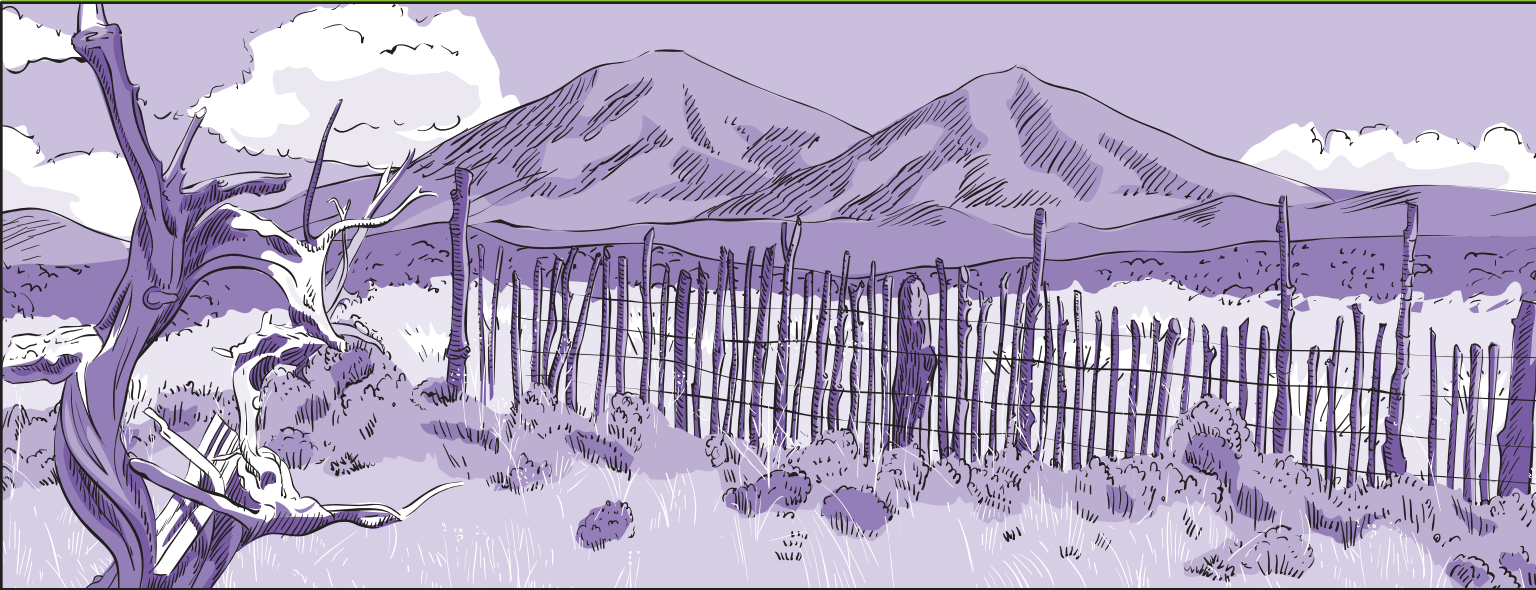
Tents or simple huts were good to get started with. But families needed to live in houses. Farmers had planned to start seeding crops as soon as they got to Mexico. Now they learned that this was not the time to put seeds in the ground. They had to wait for rain. So they built houses instead. Some of them had brought lumber from Canada to build small wooden homes. Others had to find lumber that they could buy. Later they built with adobe bricks. This is what the Mexicans used for their buildings.





# Hard Times and Good Times

## CHAPTER FIVE



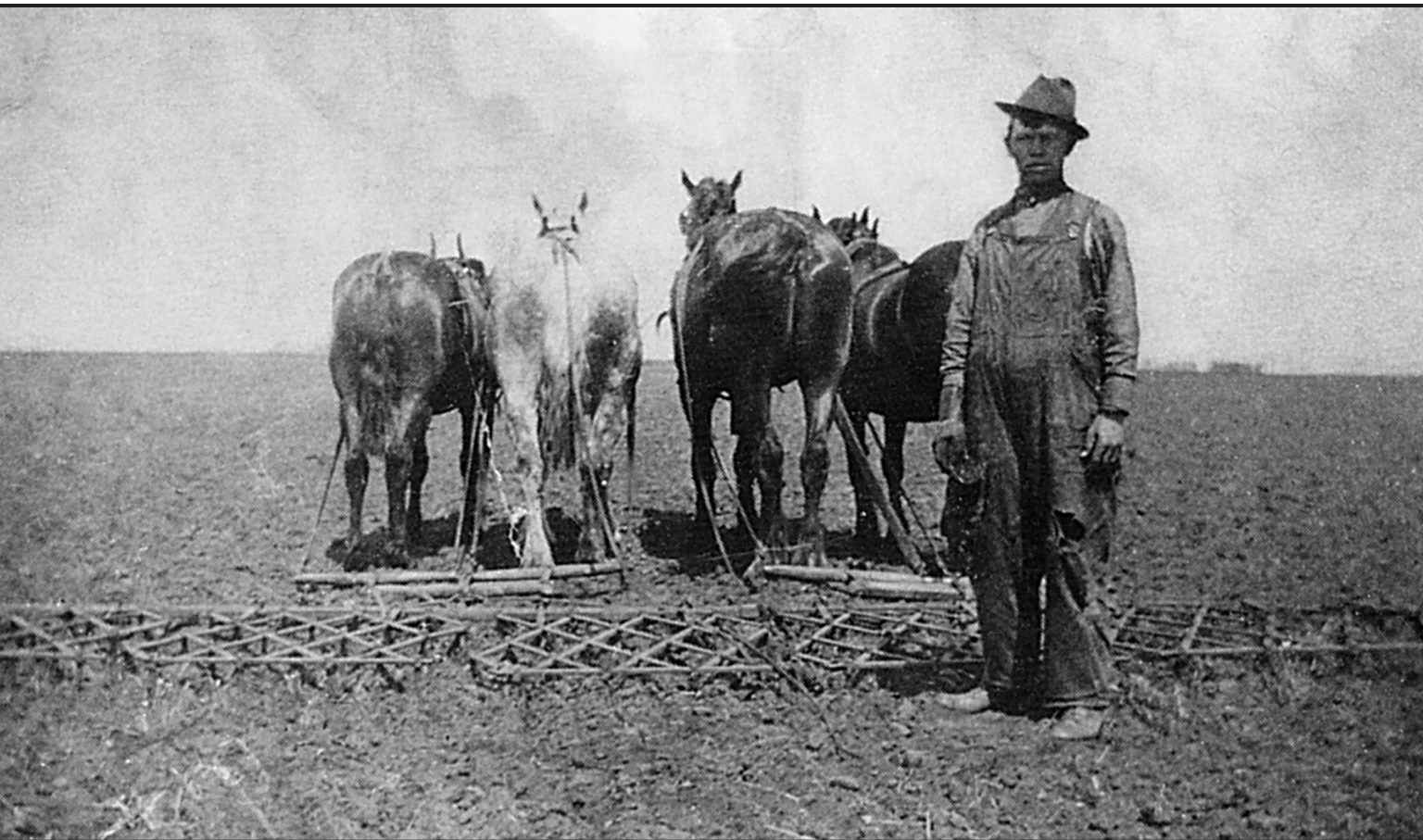
As more new settlers came from Canada, they saw how hard the people were working in Mexico. They saw how poor their life was. They talked about how easy life had been back in Canada. They described fields covered with green wheat and oats. Canada was like paradise. Mexico was like a desert.

The first settlers faced sand storms and months without rain. At first they were not able to plant the food they would need. They wondered if they would die of hunger like their cows. They reminded each other about

God's promise and their faith in God. "Blessed are those who do not see, yet believe," they told each other. These first months were their test of faith.

## 1 RAIN

Hard times often also come with things that make you laugh. One of the settlers liked to tell a story about their first dry spring in Mexico. "When will the rain come?" he had asked Mr. Schmiedehaus, who was a friend of the Mennonites. To that the German man answered, "But my child, how can it rain without clouds? We have to wait until the sky has clouds before



Tilling the land was hard work.





“We have to wait until the sky has clouds before we get rain,” said their friend Walter Schmiedehaus.

it can send us water.”<sup>5</sup>

The farmers’ equipment was ready. They had oiled the parts and put them back together after the train trip from Canada. They sharpened the ploughshares. Then the settlers waited for the clouds to bring them rain, and they did. When it came, the rain fell straight down, as if it was being poured from heaven through a huge sieve.

The village women had already planted gardens around their houses. The children had faithfully watered the seeds. So far, nothing had happened. The gardens, too, were waiting for Mr. Schmiedehaus’s clouds. When the rain finally fell, the little plants decided to grow! Every day the vegetables were taller than the day before. In no time, they would be big enough to be picked and eaten for supper. Now the settlers knew it was true. It *was* possible to grow food in Mexico!

## 2 A WHEAT FARMER LEARNS TO GROW CROPS ALL OVER AGAIN

Growing wheat in Mexico was even harder than getting vegetables to grow. One storyteller remembered how hard it had been for the farmers. Father had to learn again – like a child – how to grow crops when he moved to Mexico. Here is the story:

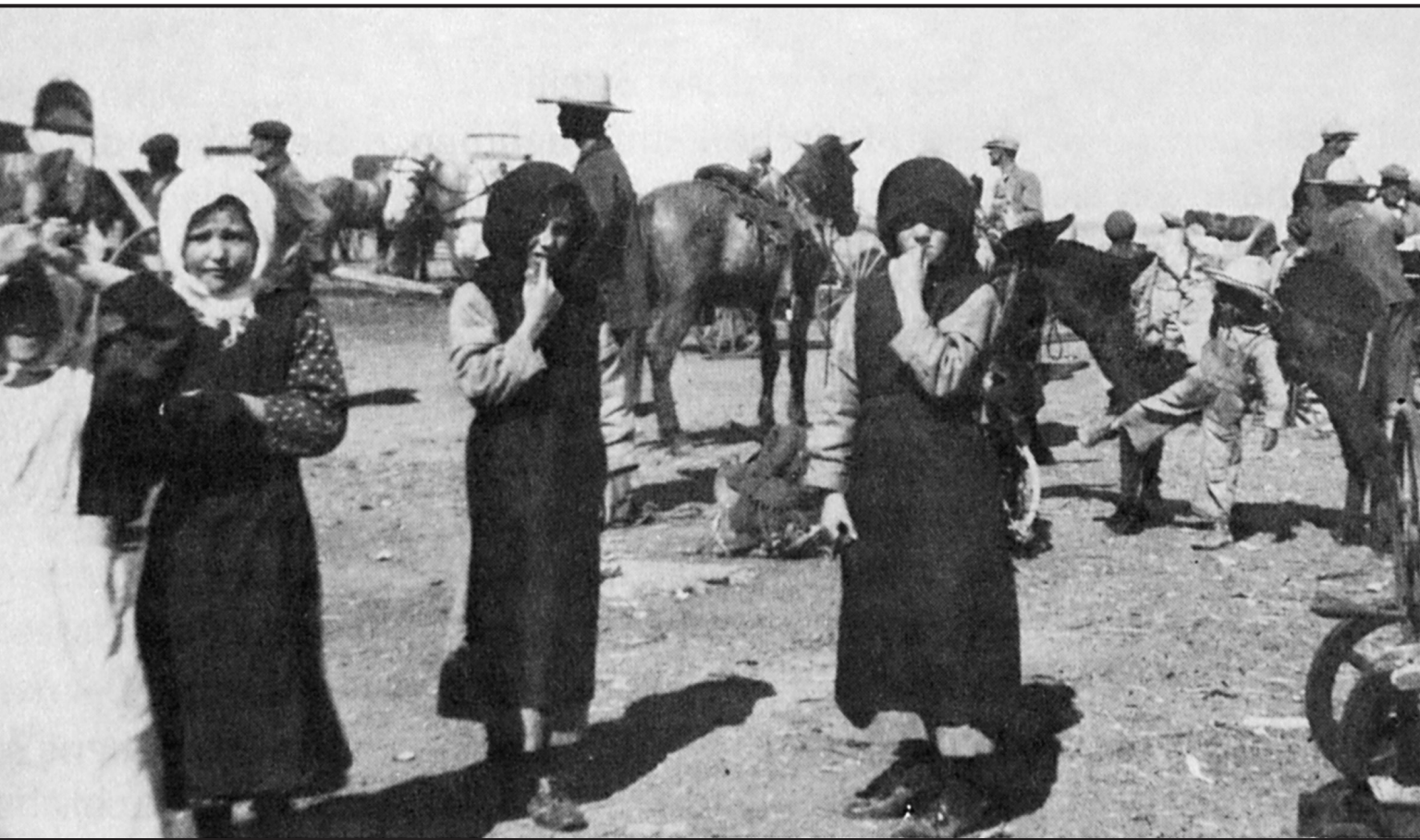
Our people did not know how to grow beans and corn like the Mexicans did. Our people were wheat growers. They knew how to prepare the land with a plough. The ploughshares, newly sharpened, cut long straight **furrows**, rows, in rich black soil. But that was in Canada.



When Father hitched up the horses to his plough in Mexico and walked them on to his field, he had a bad surprise. The shares did not dig into the soil. Father had to put **tremendous**, very great, pressure on the shares. Only then did they sink into the soil. But now he could not keep the plough straight. Father was a proud farmer. When he looked back to see his work, he felt like a complete beginner. The furrows were wavy, not straight at all. Finally Father stopped the horse and checked the ploughshare. The new blade was completely dull. It was also covered with scratches. The soil seemed to be stronger than his iron plough! What kind of land *is* this? wondered Father.

There was more bad news waiting for Father. Wheat was the queen of grain in Canada. In Mexico it didn't want to grow. Even in softer sections of soil where Father planted his wheat, and even after the rain came, the wheat did not make it. There was none to harvest. Father's oats, which he needed to feed the horses, did not do much better.<sup>6</sup>

All in all the first harvest was a sad sight. The experienced Canadian farmers would have to learn how to grow crops in Mexico. For this year it

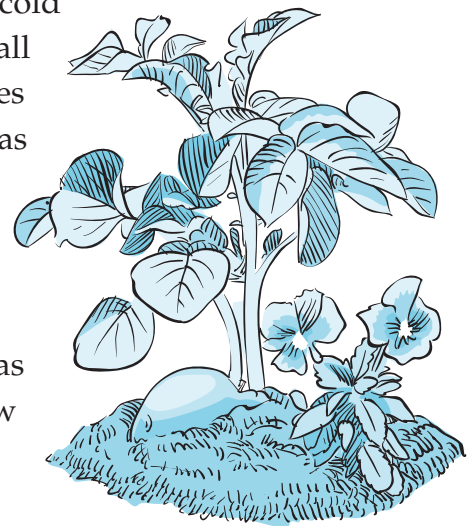


Mennonite girls in the early years.

was too late.

Once more the farmers went back to their faith and the Bible: “as long as the earth stands, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not stop” (Genesis 8:22). That’s what the Scriptures said. They would have to trust and wait. There was One who was higher than their beautiful sharp Canadian ploughs: their God who would look after them.

Next year they would try again. The women’s vegetable gardens showed them that the land was good. If they could figure out what crops would grow in Mexico, they would be fine.



### 3 WHEN THERE IS NO DOCTOR

What do you do when someone gets very sick and you have no doctor?

What do you do if your water looks clean and tastes better than any water in Canada, but it makes you very sick?

What happens if you have a **communicable disease**, a sickness that spreads to others, but you don't know how it spreads?

What if the rain you waited for also brings mosquitoes that make people sick?

How do you cure a sickness if you don't know what sickness you have?

It's hard to imagine life without a doctor. Pioneers have often lived far away from doctors and hospitals. In the 1920s, even doctors often did not know what caused the sicknesses their patients had. Even when they did know, there might be no way to cure it.

Pioneer Mennonites caught three very serious illnesses.

1. Malaria. In 1925 in Chihuahua, the good spring rain also brought mosquitoes. These mosquitoes carried malaria. About 130 people died of malaria on the Manitoba Colony during the early years. Many others were very sick. Once they had had malaria, they kept getting sick again. Even when there were no mosquitoes around, they would suddenly have a high fever. They knew that, once again, they had malaria.
2. Typhoid. No one knew how typhoid germs got into wells and water barrels. Many of the new settlers got typhoid from their drinking water. Some got very sick. Others died.
3. Smallpox. In 1926 smallpox broke out. This disease is communicable but people did not know how it spread. For example, people took sick people into their homes to care for them. Soon their whole family was sick. Many Mennonites died of smallpox.

In 1925 San Antonio got a doctor. He was the only doctor within miles. A trip to the doctor by horse and buggy could take more than a day.

Ohm Iezak wrote this sad story about his little boy, Benjamin:

When we first got here, we lived in tents for three weeks because we could barely find enough wood to build a house. Finally we nailed together a little house, out of raw boards.

When we moved into it, we finally had time to “doctor” our little Benjamin. But the heavenly Father, in his wisdom, ordered it differently. One day, April 5, I came home from a funeral. My wife came running to me. She was weeping and said our dear Benjamin had died.

When Benjamin’s Mother told her husband about their little boy, she comforted him with this poem:

*I leave my body,  
the fear and sadness,  
Because God’s home in heaven calls  
me from my room on earth.  
Why do you complain  
about my death  
When nothing more  
can ever hurt me.*

## 4 FRIEDENSRUH, A VILLAGE THAT DIED

The saddest story about this time of sickness comes from the village of Friedensruh. Almost everyone in Friedensruh died. They caught one or the other of the three illnesses. In 1925 only a few families were still there. These sad neighbours packed up their belongings and moved to other villages. Soon the houses and barns in Friedensruh grew old and collapsed. All that was left of the village was its name. A new village was called Friedensruh. The second Friedensruh is Campo 17\* and it is still standing today.

---

\* The Mexican government registered Mennonite villages by campo numbers, not by their German names. *Campo* is Spanish for countryside, field, land or farm.

## 5 FINDING THE FUNERAL

What was life on a new colony like for older children? We don't have any old diaries written by children or youth. But we can be sure that life was interesting. This vignette uses a true story about an adventure, to imagine what that adventure might have been like for young people. The vignette is set in a very new village on a very new colony, at a funeral. The funeral was not the adventure, but the experience was. Here is the actual story, as remembered by Isaak Dyck.

### VIGNETTE

## The “Almost Youth” Have Something to Talk About

Every day, life in Mexico had something new for them. There were always things to talk about in their little village south of the railroad track. Today they *really* had something to talk about. They were sitting on the ground beside the village street, as they did most evenings before it was dark. After dark they had to be inside.

They were the village youth and there were only five of them. They weren't really youth because they were still in school. But their village didn't have any real youth. These five would soon be done school. Until then they were happy to be

the “almost youth” of their village.

The sun was moving quickly down to the horizon. The mountains had already turned from blue to navy. The sky behind the mountains was still bright but now it was a mix of mauve, pink and blue. The huge desert sky felt **transparent**, as if you could look right through it. The evening air was still warm. In thirty minutes it would turn cold.

The five young people had half an hour to finish their conversation. Three Mexican soldiers on horses, with big revolvers sticking out of holsters at their hips, had come riding down the **creek bed** toward their village. They had come straight for the village, as if they had business there.

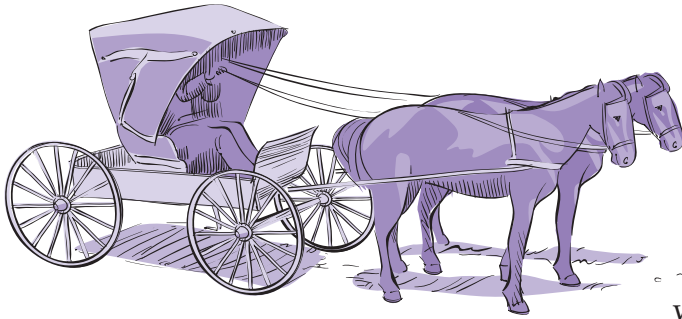
“Look!” someone had shouted. The man on the middle horse wasn’t a soldier after all. But who was he?

Once again the youth went over the details of the day. Justina had been **terrified**, afraid. Peter had felt a bit funny too. Liesbet couldn’t believe the revolvers. They were so big and so ugly. Jacob just listened and smiled at Liesbet. Of course the revolvers were big. These men were soldiers. Of course, they would have guns. On and on they went, until Maria announced that it was now dark. They had better go home, before they had to be reminded.

Manitoba Colony was big. Its villages were scattered across the colony. In the early years, there were many funerals. Life was especially hard on little children and old people. One day Ohm Iezak got a message. Mrs. Abraham Wiebe had died in Kleefeld. Could he come and conduct her funeral? Kleefeld was right at the south end of the colony. It was about thirty kilometres from Blumengart where Ohm Iezak lived. The minister had never been to Kleefeld. He wondered how he would find the village. There was

no road or railroad track to guide him. He would have to follow his sense of direction. He hoped that would get him to Kleefeld.

Very early in the morning the minister harnessed his two small horses to the buggy and set off. He drove until the sun told him it was noon.



By now he should have been close to Kleefeld, but there was no sign of a Mennonite village anywhere. The horses were tired and had slowed down to a walk. They would do no more running from here on.

Ohm Iezak finally came to an old, well-travelled road. There he stopped

to **assess the situation**, see where he

was. The road he was on must come from the mountains in the southwest. It must be heading to town, which was to the east. He decided to follow the road. Once he got to town he'd get directions to Kleefeld.

After travelling a short distance east he met an elderly Mexican couple. Each was riding a little donkey. They seemed very respectful toward him.

Ohm Iezak's first thoughts were, *if only I could speak a few words of Spanish now. I would ask them about this road, if they could put me on the right way to Kleefeld.* He signalled for the couple to stop. Then he used all the sign language he could think of. Without words, he asked the couple if they knew of any people who looked like him.

After a big effort, Ohm Iezak saw that the old woman knew what he was trying to say. She spoke to her husband and pointed with her finger. She waved her arm far to the east. Then she bent it quickly to the south. Ohm Iezak understood. He had gone too far west. Of course! Now he could see that he was much too close to the mountains. He thought carefully about the women's hand signals. *I need to turn around, go a long way on this road to the east, and then turn south.*

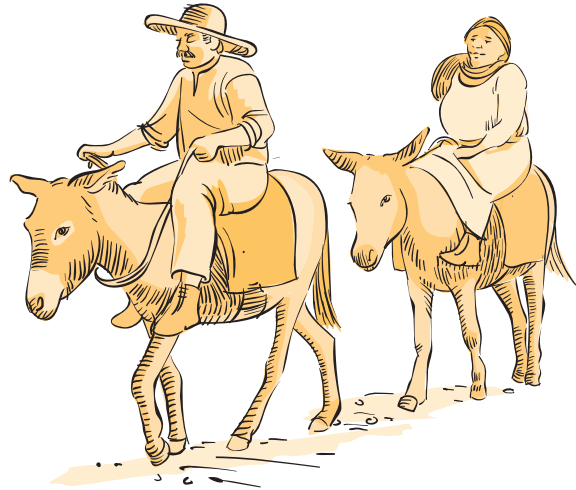
Ohm Iezak thought about what King David had written in Psalm 119. "Ich habe mich verirrt, wie ein verlorenes Schaf," he wrote – I have gone astray like a lost sheep. Ohm Iezak had gone off the right path. Life was like that too. It was easy to get on a wrong path in life and get lost. You had to keep your eyes on the loving Shepherd. If you got lost you had to look



for the way to turn around.

Now Ohm Iezak knew the right way. He turned his horses around and went slowly back on the long, right path. He kept his eyes on the south, looking for any sign of his people. After a long time he saw a tiny haystack in the distance.

*Mexicans don't make haystacks!* he thought. *That is surely a Mennonite haystack.* He guided his **exhausted**, tired horses in that direction. When



he arrived at the haystack he saw a creek bed with no water in it. Looking along the creek he saw a village. There it was! He had found Kleefeld!

The people who had gathered for the funeral were waiting anxiously for him. Everyone came out with joy to meet the minister. They had been afraid that he had had an accident. They had thought he might not make it for the funeral. Ohm Iezak told them about the Mexican couple who had put him on the right path. He said he had almost lost hope of ever finding the village. Everyone **sympathized**, felt sorry with him. Then they invited him to come inside to eat. The warm noon meal was waiting for him.

While Ohm Iezak was eating the people said they had also invited Ohm Gerhard Friesen. He was coming from Neuenberg. They thought he must have had the same bad luck. Ohm Iezak said, "Why don't we wait with the funeral. Maybe he'll still make it." After the minister finished his meal they went to sit outside by the front door. From here they could see in all directions. They would wait here for their dear Ohm Gerhard.

Suddenly, coming over a hill, they saw two soldiers on horses riding their way. The soldiers were well armed. Between them they had Ohm Gerhard. He looked like an arrested prisoner. What could this mean?

When they arrived at the



house, the two soldiers **dismounted**, got off their horses. They greeted everyone in the friendliest manner. In Ohm Gerhard's eyes, the people could read no fear. In a completely calm voice Ohm Gerhard told them what had happened. He too had got lost. After looking for the right path for a long time, he was found by these two soldiers. They showed him the right way. The soldiers worked for the government. Their job was to guard the Mennonite colony from robbers.

The soldiers sat down against the outside wall of the house. They listened with great attention to the funeral message. They also walked to the graveyard with the people. Maybe they were curious to see a Mennonite funeral. Then the villagers gave them some of the funeral *Faspa* to eat. The soldiers thanked everyone and rode away in peace.

Ohm Iezak's trip home was good. He knew where he was going. The horses were fed and ready to run. Before the sun set, Ohm Iezak was safely back in Rosengart, among the dear people there, whom he loved so much.

## 6 LETTERS

Canada seemed far away, almost like another world. The youngest children didn't even remember Canada anymore. Living in such a new place also made time stand still. Days felt like weeks. Weeks felt like months. But their little town of San Antonio had a post office. You could write to cousins and

friends back home. You also got letters from your uncles and aunts and grandparents. It seemed strange that a letter could travel so far, all the way from Canada.

San Antonio had a post office, but it was a very unusual post office. When the first settlers asked where they could mail letters, they were sent to an earthen hut. In the dark hut sat an old woman. She took their letters and threw them, all in a jumble, into a wooden box. The box was supposed to be **secure**, safe. It seemed foolish, far too simple, to drop your letters into that box. To the settlers' surprise, when



they got a chance to go to town, they might well find a letter waiting for them, at the San Antonio “post office.”

Letters were sent out **punctually**, on time from that little hut, and letters from Canada arrived safely in the simple mailbox inside. Even after you could hardly remember your big house and farm in Canada, Canada really was still there. Letters travelled slowly, but they did not get lost. All the way to Canada and back to Mexico the letters travelled safely.

## 7 THE MINISTER REFLECTS

The stories of Ohm Iezak in this reader are based on the life story that Minister Isaak Dyck wrote when he was already quite an old man. That was many years after the Mennonites set up their tent villages in Chihuahua, Mexico. Ohm Iezak remembered those olden days well. He closed his story like this.

Oh! At that time we had so much love for each other. Yes, when I think back to those days, I wish that it could always have stayed that way. We brought about our days in heat, frost and need. With great effort and hard work we built our colony. *We also really enjoyed ourselves!*

# THE CHIHUAHUA COLONIES







# The Other Two Colonies

## CHAPTER SIX



### 1 SWIFT CURRENT COLONY

Swift Current Colony was settled in 1922. Its families came from Swift Current, Saskatchewan. Today this colony is often called Swift.

The colony had thirteen villages: Neustäd, Blumenheim, Blumenhof, Rosenhof, Neuanlage, Schönfeld, Burwalde, Grünfeld,

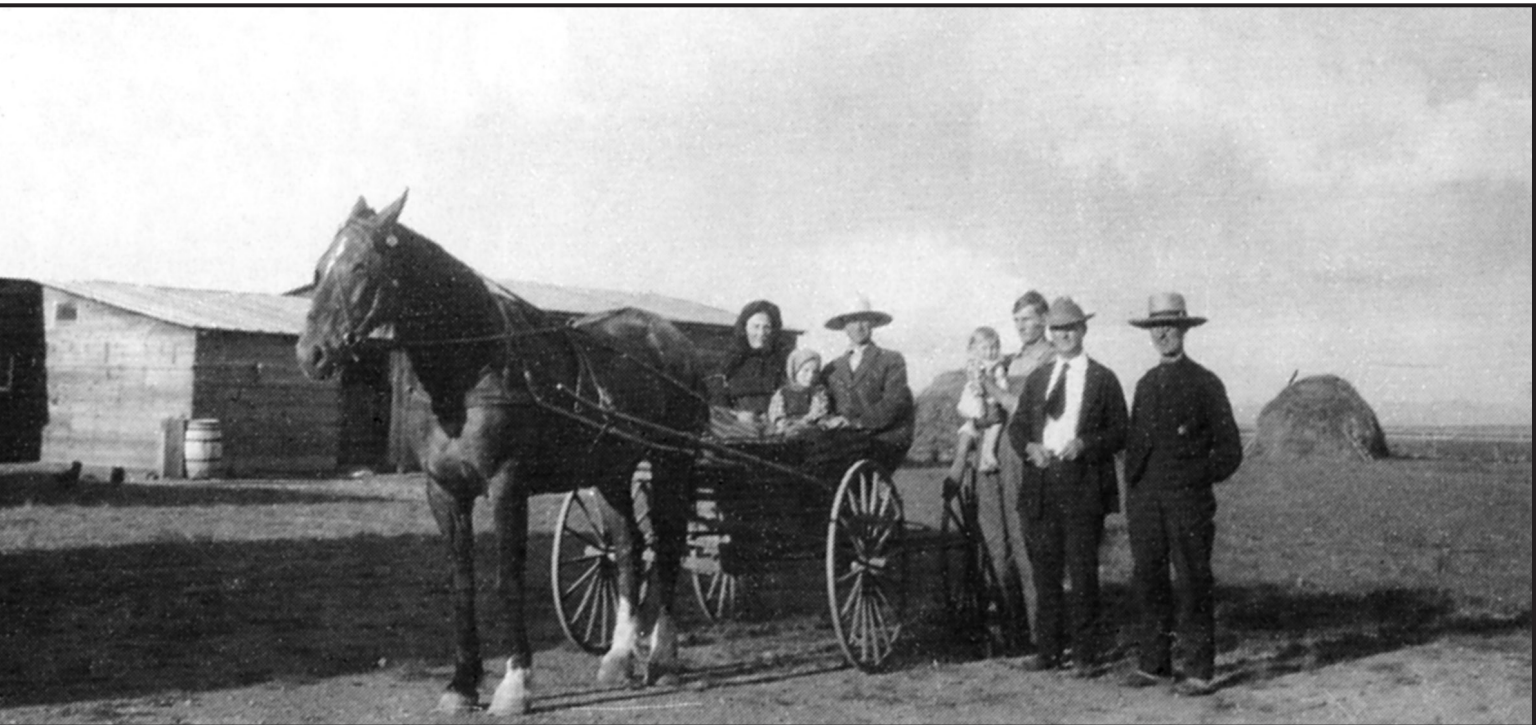
Neuhoffnung, Neurecht, Grossweide, Schönberg and Schöndorf.

Swift Colony was right beside Manitoba Colony. Together they were called the Chihuahua Colonies. Life in the two colonies was very similar. What happened on one colony usually also happened in the other one. But each colony had its own character.



Sarah Wiebe moved from Swift Current, Canada, to the Swift Current Colony in Mexico when she was three. She remembers the early years on the new colony well. She is also a good storyteller. Her stories are **snapshots**, small pictures of life on the colony. Sarah Wiebe's stories show how Manitoba and Swift Colonies were often quite different from each other.

Here are two of Grandmother Sarah's stories. They are set in the early years, when Swift Colony was very new.



A family poses for a picture with visitors from Canada. Can you spot the Canadians?



## 2 SARAH'S TALES: THE FIRST SCHOOL AT SWIFT

There were only four neighbours (families) in our village at first: the Wiebes, Ennses, Funks and Friesens. All together our school had twelve pupils. One of the Ennses' grown boys was the teacher. Boys went to school for seven years and girls went for six years. I didn't go even that long. The first year there was no teacher. The second year the teacher didn't stay very long. When we did have a teacher, I was often sick. So I missed a lot of school. It was the cold weather that made me sick.

There were three benches for the children, with the teacher in one corner. There he sat at his table. There was no more room than that. We had to sit still. There wasn't any room to walk around. We went to school there for one winter. That winter it snowed a lot. *Oba, my*, it was cold in the school. I sat in the corner farthest from the stove. Once in a while the teacher sent me to the stove to get warm.

The next winter we already built an adobe brick school. There were also more children by then. I really liked school, *opp ernst*,\* seriously. I liked everything I had to do: *Buchstabieren*, spelling out words and learning the ABC, *Rääknen*, arithmetic, reading and writing. It was all new to me.

## 3 SARAH'S TALES: A PRANK

Sarah was a girl with high spirits. She also remembers being naughty at school. Here's one of her stories about school children who didn't always behave themselves in school. Or maybe the teacher was extra strict. Read the story and see what you think.

One day we decided to play a trick on the Friesen children. This family lived far away and the children were often late for school. Then the rest of us had to wait for them. One day someone came

---

\* Pronounced up ernst, BOOKH-shtah-bee-ren, RAY-ock-nen.

up with a plan. We would teach the Friesen children to be on time. It happened that that day the Friesen children actually got to school early.

When we saw the Friesen children some distance away, coming to school we all ran to the outhouse and hid there. Then, when they were closer, we ran as fast as we could to the school, pretending we had just heard the bell. We spread ourselves out a bit so the Friesen children would be sure to see us when they drove up to the school.

They saw us running, when they were still far away. As soon as the Friesen children got close to the school they jumped out of their buggy. They had thought they were on time today! They *flew* to the school, as fast as they could run. We hurried to our benches and got out our books as if school had started. We pretended to study **diligently**. The Friesen children came in panting. “Good Morning,” they said. We could hardly answer them because we, too, were all out of breath. The Friesen children took off their coats. When they sat down and got out their books we burst out laughing.

This is when the teacher first noticed what we were doing. He was furious. We only got a good scolding that time. But if we did it again . . . , the teacher warned. Well, we had better not try that again!

“We did know how to behave ourselves,” said Sarah “but sometimes we, well, we forgot. . . .”

## 4 HAGUE COLONY MENNONITES COME TO DURANGO

The Hague Colony was **founded** in 1924. Today it is usually called Durango or by its nickname, Patos. Here is a short description of the first year of the new colony. You can read more about the Durango Colony in another

volume of Mennonite History for Young People.

On June 15, 1924, the first *Auswanderungs* train from Canada pulled into the Alios Train Station in Durango City. The Mennonites on this train had travelled all the way from Hague, Saskatchewan, in Canada.

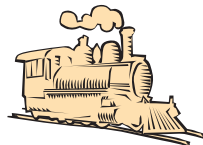
- The Mennonites on the first train built Grünfeld village.
- On January 10, 1925, the next train pulled in and Blumenort was built.
- On May 2, 1925, the third train arrived with the families who built Neuanlage.
- On December 1, 1925, the fourth train arrived and Reinland was built. Minister Johan P. Wall and Vorsteher Jacob B. Friesen came with this group.
- On April 26, 1926, the fifth train arrived with the families who built Rosenfeld. David Redekop came with this group.
- For trains and villages of Hochstadt, Reinfeld and Hochfeld we have no dates. Ältester Jacob Wiens came with the Hochfeld group.
- On December 22, 1927, the last train arrived and Grünthal was built. Benjamin Goertzen was the leader of this group.

The settlers named their new colony Hague after their home in Canada.

They built their villages as quickly as possible. The first group, for example, got organized right away. Workers were divided into four groups. Three groups built houses and one group built the school.

The school was ready just in time for Christmas. The villagers had their Christmas church service in the new school. Right after New Year's the school opened. Abram A. Martens had been the children's teacher in Canada. Now he moved right back into his old job: in a new school, on a new colony, in a new land, with the same pupils.

After the first eight trains arrived, families kept coming to Durango. They came in small groups or in single families. They joined villages that were already there, or they built new villages.





## NOTES

1. Village plan based on an illustration in Loewen, R. (1983).
2. Schmiedehaus, W. (1982), pp. 21–25.
3. *ibid.*, p. 22.
4. Loewen, R. (2001), pp. 33–49.
5. Dyck, I. Isaak Dyck's narratives were translated from *Auswanderung von Canada nach Mexico* and are retold here. Bible references used by Dyck are from an old edition of Luther's German Bible.
6. Ens, G., p. 68.
7. *ibid.*, pp. 61–71. Story translated and retold. Used with permission.

## FIFTY WORDS! THAT MIGHT BE NEW FOR YOU

**abyss.** Gorge.

**agitated.** Troubled.

**arid climate.** Dry weather.

**assess the situation.** See where you are at.

**autobiography.** One's own life story.

**board.** Get on the train.

**cajole.** Sweet-talk.

**collapse.** Fall down.

**common purpose.** The same goal.

**communicable disease.** A sickness that spreads from one person to another.

**compete.** Try to be better than others.

**creek bed.** A creek with no water in it.

**crops.** Corn or wheat.

**delegate.** Person chosen to do a job for you.

**demonstrate.** Show.

**descendant.** Child, grandchild, great grandchild.

**dilapidated.** Rundown.

**dismount.** Get off one's horse.

**elect.** Choose.

**exhausted.** Very tired.

**forebear.** Grandparent, great grandparent, and so on.

**fork hay.** Move hay with a pitchfork.

**founded.** Started.

**furrow.** Row in a field, for planting seed.

**hugely complicated.** Very difficult.

**humble.** Not proud.

**incline.** Uphill or downhill slope.

**inherit.** Get from your parents or grandparents after they die.

**jostling.** Pushed around.

**minister of agriculture.** The person in the government who looks after farming.

**necessities of life.** Things we need to live.

**not in so many words.** Not said exactly, but we know what they mean.

**optimist.** One who sees the bright side.

**out of sight.** Cannot be seen anymore.

**produce.** Grow.

**public school.** Government school.

**punctually.** On time.

**put down the cash.** Pay.

**reorganize their church.** Take a new name for their church.

**secure.** Safe.

**shriek.** High-pitched roar.

**snapshot.** Picture of what life is like.

**sympathize.** Feel sorry for.

**terrified.** Very afraid.

**tirade.** Outburst of talking.

**tract.** Area of land.

**transparent.** Being able to see through it.

**tremendous.** Great.

**unity.** Agreement, harmony, what people have when living together peacefully.

**urgent.** Very important.

## SOURCES

- Dyck, Isaak M. *Auswanderung von Canada nach Mexico*. 3rd ed. Cuauhtémoc, Chihuahua: self-published, 1995.
- Ens, Gerhard. "De easchte Wienachten enn Mexiko." In *De easchte Wienachten enn Kanada enn aundre Jeschichten*, edited by Erica Ens and Gerhard Ens, 61–71. Edmonton: RTP Archive Press, 2011.
- Fast Wiebe, Sarah. Interview by Doreen Helen Klassen, May 5, 2010. Translated from Low German by Rosabel Fast.
- Loewen, Royden. *Blumenort: A Mennonite Community in Transition, 1974 to 1982*. Steinbach, Manitoba: Blumenort Mennonite Historical Society, 1983.
- . *Hidden Worlds: Revisiting the Mennonite Migrants of the 1870s*. Winnipeg, Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 2001.
- Quiring, David. *The Mennonite Old Colony Vision under Siege in Mexico and the Canadian Connection*. Steinbach, Manitoba: Crossway Publication, 2003.
- Rempel, Gerhard, and Franz Rempel. *75 Jahre Mennoniten in Mexiko*. Cuauhtémoc, Chihuahua: Comité Pro Archivo Histórico y Museo Mennonita, 1997.
- Sawatzky, Harry Leonard. *They Sought a Country: Mennonite Colonization in Mexico*. Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1997.
- Schmiedehaus, Walter. *Die Altkolonier-Mennoniten in Mexiko*. Winnipeg and Steinbach, Manitoba: CMBC Publications with *Die Mennonitische Post*, 1982.
- . *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott: der Wanderung eines christlichen Siedlervolkes*. Cuauhtémoc, Chihuahua: self-published, 1948.
- Warkentin, Abe. *Gäste und Fremdlinge*. Steinbach, Manitoba: *Die Mennonitische Post*, 1987.









In the 1920s a large group of Mennonites made a big decision. They would sell their homes and farms in Manitoba and Saskatchewan and build new farming villages in Mexico. In this reader you will meet the people who made that decision and find out why they made it. You will travel across Mexico with six men who were sent to find just the right land for their people. You will go by train with the children, young people, their parents and their farm animals, to their new homeland. You will enjoy your first breakfast of bread and coffee in your tent-village home. “No breakfast had ever tasted so good,” wrote Ohm Iezak. You will also meet Mexicans who wondered who all these strangers were. All that and more. . . .

On the cover: a trip by mule train across a steep mountain pass at night was one of many experiences David Rempel recorded in his diary in February, 1921. Rempel was one of six men chosen by their Mennonite people in Canada to search for a new homeland in Mexico.

