

Preservings

~ A Journal of the D. F. Plett Historical Research Foundation Inc.



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"A people who have not the pride to record their own history will not long have the virtues to make their history worth recording; and no people who are indifferent to their past need hope to make their future great."

— Jan Gleysteen



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In this Issue

Our 28th issue of *Preservings* features the migration to Mexico in the 1920s. Bill Janzen's presentation to the Low German network meetings in Aylmer, Ontario in 2007 is published here in its full and slightly revised form. Bill retired from his many years of work on behalf of Low German speaking Mennonites and his presentation offers a clear explanation of the issues that led up to the migration and the joys and sorrows that accompanied such a dramatic relocation. The letter from the lawyer, John H. Black is much closer to the actual event. Black visited the Mennonites in Mexico in 1926 and in his letter to the *Morden Times* he challenges the rumours that the migration is a failure. The Krause photo collection, of which only a sample is reproduced here, is a collection of photographs taken in Mexico in the 1920s, after Mennonites had begun to settle there. To a limited extent we have used modern photo editing technology to enhance them for publication. They offer an interesting visual sense of what the landscape of Chihuahua was like in the 1920s. In contrast Hans Werner's photos and description of the Manitoba Colony in April 2008 dramatically illustrates how change has come to the Old Colony Mennonites who left Manitoba eighty-five years ago.

Glen Klassen and Kimberly Penner's article uses a story from the past to ask questions about how Mennonite church and community life would be affected if a pandemic was to occur. The D.F. Plett Historical Research Foundation provided Klassen with a grant, which he has used to research the 1918 flu epidemic in Manitoba. We learn not only about the flu, but about the sacrifice made by church leaders who felt called to minister to the flock even when there was risk to their own health. Conrad Stoesz has expanded on earlier research he did on the migration of Old Colony Mennonites to Burns Lake, British Columbia. In his work as an archivist he came across interesting photos and analysis of the success of this Depression era migration. We also are pleased to publish here the work of Alan Warkentin who has uncovered an interesting history of the Haskett area in Southern Manitoba. Alan's work is part of dedicated efforts of the West Reserve local history group that is engaged in a project to bring to life the histories of some of the last villages whose story has not been told. Maria Falk Lodge focuses on the women of Rosengard, near Steinbach. Her emphasis is on the later Russlaender migration and the resilience shown by these women who had been through difficult times. Finally we reprint a journal by Leonard Sawatzky, a scholar of Mennonites in Mexico who died in April 2008. Sawatzky traveled in Bolivia and sent his thoughts on what he saw and experienced in South America back to Canada where they were published. We reprint here his journal from the April 1972 issue of the *Mennonite Mirror*. Our issue also features reviews of recent books, a fine biography of Friesen's from Nebraska, and book reviews. In particular, our review section features reviews of two video productions featuring Mennonites in Mexico. Royden Loewen reviews the movie *Stellet Licht* while Kerry Fast gives us her thoughts on the documentary *Living in a Perfect World*.

Our thanks to all those who share with us the fruits of their work and allow us to be the print record of their stories.

Preservings, a journal of the D.F. Plett Historical Research Foundation, Inc., is published annually. Co-editors are Hans Werner 1.204.786.9352 h.werner@uwinnipeg.ca and John J. Friesen, 1.204.487.3300, jjfriesen@cmu.ca. The annual subscription fee is \$20.00, and should be made out to the D. F. Plett Historical Research Foundation, and mailed to Hans Werner, D. F. Plett Historical Research Foundation, Inc., University of Winnipeg, 515 Portage Ave., Winnipeg, Manitoba R3B 2E9. Reader responses are welcome. Please send manuscripts, articles, and/or photographs to the above address at the University of Winnipeg. Our mission is to inform our readers about Mennonite history, and in particular to promote a respectful understanding and appreciation of the contribution made by the so-called conservatives.

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Editorial by John J. Friesen

A Useable Past

In the 1940s, Harold S. Bender, dean of Goshen Biblical Seminary in Goshen, Indiana, gave a presidential address to the American Historical Society, the title of which was "An Anabaptist Vision." In this address he summarized almost two decades of intense research into the sixteenth century Anabaptist story by a group of scholars whom he had assembled at Goshen College.

The address had two audiences and two agendas. The one audience was the group of historians from universities throughout North America who had assembled for their annual meeting. To this audience, Bender said that to view the Anabaptist movement through the events of the Peasants War (1524-25), or of the uprising in the Westphalian city of Muenster (1533-35), as had been done during the past four hundred years, was to misunderstand the Anabaptist movement. According to this historical view, Anabaptists were seen as violent revolutionaries, disturbers of the social and political order, and a threat to society. But this view was wrong, Bender said.

Rather, Bender said, the Anabaptist movement was a thoroughly religious movement within the sixteenth century reform era. It was thoroughly biblical, basing both faith and life upon the Bible. On the basis of its strong Biblicism, Anabaptism developed three main theological characteristics: the centrality of community in understanding the Christian faith, of discipleship, that is, the daily living of the faith, and peace, or nonresistant love as central in understanding God's love to humans. Bender's agenda in addressing the historians was to provide a more positive and a more theological view of Anabaptism than scholars had seen up to this point.

The other audience that Bender addressed was the (Old) Mennonite Church, his own denomination. In the years from the 1920s to the 1940s, the Mennonite Church was caught in the struggle between fundamentalism and modernity. This conflict, which, was going on in all church groups in the USA and Canada at that time, was

changing the character of the Mennonite Church in a way that worried Bender. To this Mennonite Church audience Bender was saying that they were not limited to only two options; fundamentalism and modernity. There was a third option: their own Anabaptist theological heritage. This heritage with its solid biblicism, and its emphases on community, discipleship, and peace (nonresistance), could form the basis for a dynamic reform that would avoid the pitfalls of both liberalism and fundamentalism.

And it worked. Many in the Mennonite Church in the USA and Canada adopted Bender's vision for renewal. Mennonites in other churches accepted this vision as well: Mennonite Brethren, General Conference, Evangelical Mennonite Conference, Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference, and others to varying degrees accepted the Anabaptist vision as a way to reform and renew the church. Study conferences were held in European Mennonite settings and Bender's vision spread there as well. Bender's theology was introduced to churches in the developing world, and often received a warmer response than it had received in North America or Europe. Thus, in the past sixty plus years, Bender's vision has had a profound influence upon Mennonites around the world, both for those who accepted it, and those who argued against it. Bender largely set the Anabaptist-Mennonite theological agenda during these years.

What Bender provided Mennonites was a 'useable past.' He believed passionately that the past could be used to reform the present, and provide a direction for the future. The past, thus, was not only a collection of interesting stories, but could provide sustenance and nurture for the church.

Do conservative Mennonites, Old Colonists and others, have a useable past? Or, to state it differently, could Old Colonists reform themselves from within on the basis of their own Anabaptist-Mennonite past?

Some people have felt that Old Colonists, especially the horse and buggy groups in Latin America are in need of reform,

and have sent missionaries to convert their members to a 'real' Christian faith. Some groups who have engaged in such missions are non-Mennonite like the German Gemeinde Gottes. Most groups, however, are Mennonite, including the General Conference, Mennonite Brethren, Evangelical Mennonite Conference, and Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference. Most of these mission efforts have ignored the Old Colony Church and its leaders, and have simply directed their appeal to dissatisfied members at the fringes of the community. Where possible, these dissatisfied members have been 'converted' according to the missionizing churches understanding of conversion, and the converts have been organized into alternative churches. These alternative churches then pose a threat to the Old Colony Churches, and make their ministry to their own members more difficult.

Such mission efforts proceed on the assumption that the Old Colony Church is no church, and that it has lost its connection with its own faith heritage. The missionizing churches assume that Christian faith has been lost, and all the Old Colonists can do to reform themselves is to start over again, that is, be converted, reject their past as ungodly, and start a new faith journey.

There are many, and I am one of them, who feel that this negative evaluation of Old Colonists is wrong. If one speaks to Old Colonists, if one sees their preaching, teaching, and ministry to each other, there is a solid core of faith and faithfulness in their communities and individuals. Sure, they have their weaknesses and problems, but what church doesn't. However, Old Colonists exemplify many of the basic biblical emphases that Bender identified in his address to the American historians in the 1940s. On many of Bender's points, the Old Colonists have been as faithful, or maybe even more faithful, than many of their more liberal, educated, and evangelical critics.

It may well be that the Old Colonists not only have a useable past which they can tap, it may also be that if the more liberal, acculturated, and so-called evangelical Mennonites entered into serious dialogue with Old Colonists, they could learn from them. The Old Colonists useable past might even be useable for all of us.

News

School children learn more about Mennonite history—have a wonderful time—and win some money.

The Chihuahua government promoted knowledge of Mennonite history among school children by sponsoring a contest, which came to a close with a celebration in the Colony house. The head of the Cuauhtémoc office, Maria del Carmen Ramirez presented 9 prizes to three students in each

of three categories, namely students from the village schools, secondly those from registered ("incorporada") schools, and thirdly adults.

The first prize in each category was 7,000 Pesos (almost 700 dollars), the second 5,000 and the third 3,000. The prizes for the

village school category were awarded to Lisa Kroeker Peters, 13 years old; Eva Harder (Sabinal), 12 years old, and Aganetha Penner (Neuhorst, Nr. 13), 10 years old.

For the registered schools (“incorporadas”) the winners were Kristina Dyck Banman, (Neustaedt, Nr. 101); Nelly Klassen, (El Valle), 11 years old; und Flora Heide Neufeld, who has not yet been located to claim her prize of 3,000 pesos.

The prizes for adults went to Lolita Friesen, Nr. 301; Amelia Plett, Nr. 302 and Agatha Thiessen Wiebe, Gnadenthal.

Aside from the prizes all the winners received a trophy and a plaque from the state government. These were formally presented by the head of the Cuauhtémoc office, Maria del Carmen Ramirez.

Later the 300 to 400 people attending were served a full ‘faspá,’ including Tim Hortons coffee from Canada, prepared by Mina Hamm, Friedensruh and paid for by the government.

The winners, and all the others who had handed in an essay, made a field trip to Chihuahua. Approximately 150 students, a number of school teachers, and government workers visited a very interesting museum and a large park (on the University Street), which was reserved for them for a number of hours. Some of the attractions (such as electric cars that somehow always wanted to crash into each other) in the park were so popular that there were long lines of hopeful children.

Observers were astounded at how the children enjoyed it all. Some parents had misgivings before the event, but had given permission for their children to attend. The entire project was organized by the “Encuentro con los Mennonitas” office in Cuauhtémoc and was led by Lic. Katarina Renpennig.

From Jorge Reimer, *Kurze Nachrichten*, 599, May 23, 2008

Foundation launches new Website

In the spring of 2008 the D.F. Plett Historical Research Foundation, Inc. launched its new website. The website takes advantage of new web content technologies that make it easier to update. Along with a new design the website has a new photo section where we will be placing images from the collection of historical photographs of Mennonites in Europe, Russia, Canada and Latin America. The complete set of back issues of *Preservings* is also available online on the website. An index prepared for volumes 1-13 has also been included and is now searchable online. There is currently no index for volumes 14 to the most recent issue; however these are

searchable using internet search tools on an issue by issue basis.

Plett Foundation Opens Offices at the University of Winnipeg

The legacy of Delbert Plett, a Steinbach lawyer who died in 2004 will live on thanks in part to a partnership between the University of Winnipeg and the D.F. Plett Historical Research Foundation. At a ceremony at the University of Winnipeg on November 7, 2008, the Foundation officially accepted the keys to their new office at the University. Dr. Royden Loewen, Chair of the Foundation’s Board noted that before he passed away in 2004, Delbert Plett was a Steinbach lawyer, land developer and promoter of history with a keen interest in telling the story of Traditionalist Mennonites. Plett left the majority of his estate to the D.F. Plett Historical Research Foundation, which is committed to continuing this work. Dr. Loewen also thanked the University of Winnipeg for its tradition of supporting Mennonite studies and looks forward to further developing this partnership. University of Winnipeg President, Dr. Lloyd Axworthy welcomed the Foundation to the University and noted that the partnership with the foundation is a continuation of Plett’s work and an important key to the study of Canadian History. Axworthy emphasized the importance of the Foundation as one of a group of organizations participating in the development of the Canadian History Centre at the University.

The Foundation’s offices are on the second floor of Bryce Hall, one of the older buildings on the campus located just east of Wesley Hall. In addition to managing the work of the Foundation, Executive Director, Dr. Hans Werner teaches Mennonite Studies and Canadian History in the University’s History Department. The Foundation publishes *Preservings*, and annual history magazine and makes available grants for research and publication of Mennonite History. It has also established a fellowship program at the University of Winnipeg and Canadian Mennonite University for graduate students who are planning research programs that fit with the Foundation’s mandate.



The D.F. Plett Historical Foundation, Inc. is the residual beneficiary of Delbert Plett’s estate and estate executors Tom Mooney and Norman Plett, Delbert’s brother, were on hand to celebrate this important milestone in the Foundation’s development. It is estimated that the estate will be fully liquidated and the Foundation fully operational in another two or three years.

International ‘Horse and Buggy’ Mennonite’ Research Team Meets in St. Jacob’s Ontario

On September 4-6 an 8-person research team met in St. Jacobs, Ontario for a Workshop to prepare for an extensive oral history project among the so-called ‘Horse and Buggy’ Mennonites. They include the 4000 Old Order Mennonites in Ontario and some 60,000 Old Colony Mennonites (originally from Manitoba and Saskatchewan) in various points in Central and South America.

The research team, organized by the Chair in Mennonite Studies, University of Winnipeg, consists of graduate and post-graduate university students in a diversity of fields that include anthropology, history and theology. The student researchers themselves hail from Uppsala (Sweden), Berlin (Germany), Amsterdam, Toronto, Winnipeg, and from the smaller centers of Winkler (Mantioba) and Elmira (Ontario). During the St. Jacob’s Workshop, the students reported on their earlier visits with ‘Horse and Buggy’ or Conservative Mennonites in both Canada and Central and South America. Anna Sofia Hedberg from Sweden, for example, presented a chapter from her dissertation on Nuevo Durango Colony in Bolivia, Kerry Fast of Toronto on interviews among Old Colony Mennonite women in southern Ontario and Andy Martin from Elmira on his MA thesis on Conservative Mennonite theology.

Over the next three years the students will disperse throughout the Americas. They plan to interview ‘Horse and Buggy’ Mennonites, asking how they have confronted and adjusted to pressures of modern life in Ontario, northern and southern Mexico, Belize, Bolivia, East Paraguay and Argentina. Each of the students will undertake a four month field ethnographic study, working in Low German, Spanish or English. They will ask about family history, the story of moving to new settlements, their faith encounters and spirituality, the passing on of the faith to children, their friendship circles, relations with national neighbors, ways of making a living, and the challenges and joys of living as ‘horse and buggy people.’

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Feature Articles

Government Pressure, Mennonite Separateness, and the 1920s Migration to Mexico and Paraguay

A presentation by Bill Janzen to the hemispheric networking meeting of workers in the MCC Low German program, April 23, 2007, Aylmer, Ontario

It is a privilege to be with you. I have been asked to speak on why some Mennonites from Manitoba and Saskatchewan moved to Mexico and Paraguay in the 1920s. This is a challenging question. I know some things about it. But you do too. Your parents and grandparents will have told stories that would shed light on our question. I would love to hear your stories.

At least three answers have been given to our question. One answer is that it was the fault of Canadian governments, that the federal government refused to honour its earlier promise about school freedoms and that the provincial governments were too zealous and too harsh in forcing the public schools. A second answer, given particularly by critics of the move, is that the leaders of these Mennonite groups were too strict, too controlling of their people, and too resistant to a degree of integration with the larger society. A third answer is that it was God's will and that the exodus was a faithful Christian response to the circumstances. Let us keep these possible answers in mind as we look at the story.

Background Developments

To tell the story we need to go back to Russia in the 1850s and 60s. Things were changing in the Mennonite colonies. The Russian government wanted the Mennonites to start teaching the Russian language in their schools and to have their young men do a national service, though, after hearing the Mennonite appeals, they agreed that it would not have to be military service. In addition, among the Mennonites, there was interest in new farming methods, in higher education, in different singing styles, and in interacting more with the outside world.

Also at this time, an economic gap appeared among the Mennonites. A modest but growing number did not have land, even though some new colonies had been started. They made their living by working on the farms of wealthier Mennonites but the wages were not high. As a result there were divisions among the Mennonites

along economic lines as well as along the lines of whether to support the new social ideas. In general it can be said that the 7000 Mennonites who moved from Russia to Manitoba in the 1870s were poorer and more hesitant about the social changes.

At first, these Mennonite settlers were warmly welcomed by the Canadian government. It was eager to attract farmers to the western prairies. In 1873 the Mennonite exploratory delegation received a letter from the federal minister responsible for immigration giving them large blocks of land, the right to settle in villages, exemption from military service, and complete freedom in the education of their children.¹ In 1877, just three years after the first ones arrived, they received a visit from Canada's Governor General, Lord Dufferin, who told them:

It is with the greatest pleasure that I have passed through your villages, and witnessed your comfortable homesteads, barns and byres, which have risen like magic upon this fertile plain, for they prove that you are expert in agriculture and possess a high standard of domestic comfort.²

Upon his return to Winnipeg, the Governor General summed up his impressions in a public speech, saying:

Although I have witnessed many sights to cause me pleasure during my various progresses through the Dominion, seldom have I beheld any spectacle more pregnant with prophecy, more fraught with promise of a successful future than the Mennonite Settlement.... When I visited these interesting people, they had been only two years in the province, and yet in a long ride I took across many miles of prairie, which but yesterday was absolutely bare, desolate, untenanted, the home of the wolf, the badger, and the eagle, I passed village after village, homestead after homestead, furnished with all the conveniences and incidents of European comfort, and of a

scientific agriculture; while on either side of the road, cornfields ripe for harvest, and pastures populous with herds of cattle stretched away to the horizon. Even on this continent, - the peculiar theatre of rapid change and progress - there has nowhere, I imagine, taken place so marvellous a transformation.³

The government also gave these Mennonite settlers a loan. They had already received one loan of \$50,000 from the Mennonites in Ontario. But they needed more, so the Ontario Mennonites persuaded the government in Ottawa to make a \$100,000 loan to the Mennonite settlers in Manitoba. When this was repaid, in 1892, the federal Minister said in the House of Commons:

The history of any country does not afford, I undertake to say, a case in which an obligation to the government on the part of any society, company or individual has been fulfilled with greater faithfulness than this.⁴

Given these glowing governmental words, it is hard to believe that in just a few decades there would be harsh negative policies, such that in the 1920s, over 7,700 Mennonites from Manitoba and Saskatchewan felt they had to leave the country in order to preserve their faith. Much of the change had to do with the school system. To tell that story I will divide the school developments into three stages.

School Developments

(a) **Stage One, 1874 - 1891:** This first stage deals only with Manitoba. At that time there were no public schools as we know them. The Mennonite pioneers set up their own schools, identical to those they had had in Russia. The French Catholics, Ukrainians, Italians, Jews, and other newcomer groups in Manitoba also set up their own schools. Each group could develop its own curriculum, use its own language, and hire as teachers whomever it wished. There were no overall regulations.

However, Manitoba had a board of education with Protestant and Catholic sections. This board had some government money with which it gave small grants to schools; the Catholic section to Catholic schools, and the Protestant section to Protestant schools. The grants helped to pay the teachers' salaries and other expenses. But soon the board started saying that in order to get the grants the teachers should take some teacher-training courses and use some standard curriculum materials. Of course, if the schools did not want to do this, they did not have to. They would then just not get the grants.

How did the Mennonite settlers respond? In two ways. Some accepted the grants. These encouraged their teachers to learn some English and to use some of the government's curriculum materials. Before long these Mennonites also set up their own teacher training institute in Gretna, with financial help from the government. Other Mennonites, however, continued to operate their own private schools using only their own money and only their own curriculum materials. What we have then are two streams among the Mennonites.

Not surprisingly this duality led to a division in the churches. The Old Colony church, whose official name was *Reinländer Mennoniten Gemeinde*, and who were concentrated in the Winkler area, that is, the West Reserve, had only private schools. They never took any government money. But those who originated from the Bergthal colony in Russia were divided. Those Bergthalers who settled in the Steinbach area, that is, the East Reserve, became known as Chortitzers and their stance was similar to that of the Old Colony, meaning that they ran their own private schools and did not accept government money. In contrast, in the West Reserve some Bergthalers favoured the new education ideas, though other Bergthalers there were ambivalent. The latter became known as Sommerfelder.

Just before the Bergthaler/Sommerfelder separation took place, some Manitoba Bergthaler people moved to the Hague area of what would soon be called Saskatchewan. They kept the name, Bergthaler, but opted to be in fellowship with the Manitoba Sommerfelder, not with the Manitoba Bergthaler. A few years later some Manitoba Sommerfelder moved to the Swift Current area of Saskatchewan. They kept the Sommerfelder name. So there were four groups in the Bergthaler family with reservations about governmental school policies: in Manitoba, the Sommerfelder in the West Reserve and Chortitzer in the East Reserve, and in Saskatchewan, the

Sommerfelder at Swift Current and the Bergthaler at Hague. The Kleine Gemeinde group who lived in the East Reserve, also had reservations but in these years they accommodated themselves to governmental policies. The Bergthaler in the West Reserve and the newly formed Mennonite Brethren did not object to the government's school policies at this time. Some accepted them eagerly.

(b) Stage Two, 1890 - 1916: By 1890 thousands of English Protestants from Ontario had moved to Manitoba. They were now far more numerous than the Catholics. Before long the provincial government passed a law - often seen as an anti-Catholic law - stipulating that government money would no longer go to church run schools, of which Catholics had the largest number. Schools would now be organized on a district basis and run by the people, that is the public, in a given district. They would be called "public" or "district" schools. The purpose of the schools, these people said, was not to turn children into Catholics or Protestants, but into Canadian citizens and subjects of the British Empire.

Not surprisingly, the Catholics were very upset by this change. They had friends in Ottawa. These then applied pressure on the Manitoba government. Extensive negotiations followed. Eventually, it was decided that, yes, government funding for church-run schools would end, but there would be funding for bilingual schools. But what did "bilingual" mean at that time? Leaders in the government knew that if it meant only French and English, then people would say that they were giving in to the Catholics, just in a different way. So they defined bilingual to mean, English plus a second language if it was requested by the parents of ten or more students in a district.

For those Mennonites who were already in the public stream, this was good news. They would now teach English and German. And their teacher training institute would train teachers in the government's curriculum and in English and German. It worked well for several decades. A number of Sommerfelder communities in West Reserve now accepted the new public schools, as did a number of Kleine Gemeinde communities and before long a second teacher training school was operating in southern Manitoba, this one in Altona. Years later a government report said that the bilingual schools in Mennonite areas had been the best in Manitoba; that in many other areas the children had been taught mainly the second language and very little English, but that in the Mennonite areas they had been taught both.⁵

But these English/German bilingual schools were only one part of the Mennonite school story in Manitoba. The other part involved the private schools in the Old Colony and Chortitzer areas. They continued as they always had, in their traditional format and without any government money.

Also in this second stage there were developments in Saskatchewan. Mennonite people of many kinds started moving there early in the 1890s, not only from Manitoba, but from Prussia, Russia, the USA, and Ontario. The school laws in Saskatchewan were similar to those of Manitoba except that Saskatchewan did not allow for bilingual schools. Schools that received government money were English only, except for the last half hour. A majority of the Mennonites in Saskatchewan accepted that. And, as in Manitoba, the Saskatchewan Mennonites built a teacher training institute, already in 1905, calling it the German-English Academy, in Rosthern. By training teachers in a Mennonite school and by using the last half hour of the day to teach German and religion, the schools in Mennonite communities felt as if they were Mennonite schools even though they were in the public system.

Though a majority of the Mennonites in Saskatchewan accepted the public schools in this way, the Old Colony people there did not. They continued with their traditional private schools. And as in Manitoba, the Saskatchewan government allowed them to do so. Still, both provincial governments encouraged people to accept the public schools. The reasons for this are understandable. In these decades hundreds of thousands of settlers from various parts of Europe came to the western prairies. They continued to speak the languages of their homelands and had little in common with each other. It was not wrong that the provincial governments wanted to encourage them to learn a common language and gain at least some common understandings. Many prominent people including leaders in Methodist, Presbyterian and other "English" churches saw it as good social policy to promote public schools. The problem is not that the governments encouraged public schools; it is that with these Mennonites they forced them, in a very harsh way.

(c) Stage Three, 1916 - 1920s: This stage can be said to begin with World War I which raged from 1914 to 1918. Canada was deeply involved in this war, far more deeply than in World War II. In the first war, 66,000 Canadian soldiers were killed; in the second, that number was 44,000. Nearly all able bodied young men, at least from

'English' Canada, served in the first war. It is not surprising that strong patriotic feelings were aroused. These are evident in the memorials in many towns and cities across Canada. Nor is it surprising that these feelings influenced the public schools. They came to be seen as places where children were to be taught to appreciate all things British and to be loyal subjects of the empire. Before long certain school laws were changed to reflect this intent.

One change, made in Manitoba in 1916, was the abolition of the bilingual character of the public schools. This affected the French Catholics, Ukrainians, and others. But among the Mennonites it affected only those who were in the public system, including the Bergthaler and some Sommerfelder and 'Kleine Gemeinde' people. Understandably, they were concerned. They now pleaded with the government, saying that the German language was almost inseparable from their faith. When the government refused to bend, some Sommerfelder and Kleine Gemeinde communities got out of the public school system and set up private schools again since private schools were still allowed. Others accommodated themselves to the new school laws, relying on the half-hour at the end of each school day and their own Saturday and Sunday classes to teach their faith and the German language.

A second change came soon thereafter when both provinces made school attendance compulsory. The laws did not quite say that the attendance had to be at English-only public schools but that is the way they were interpreted. This set the stage for harsh governmental action against those Mennonites who had private schools.

Since attendance at public schools was now required, there had to be public schools in all communities. When people in the Old Colony and Chortitzer communities would not sell land on which to build these schools, the government expropriated land. When no one in these communities was willing to help build these schools, the government sent in construction crews from the outside. When the local people were not willing to serve on boards of trustees for these schools the government appointed official trustees from the outside. These official trustees then hired teachers who went to the schools in the morning, rolled up the flag, even though, in some cases, no children came for a whole year. The children continued to go to their private schools.

But the governments had ways of applying pressure. They imposed fines. In a few cases they sent parents to jail, but then they decided that that could make them appear as

martyrs. So they used fines in many communities though not in all, it seems. Both of my parents were small children in those years and in both cases, their parents paid fines for them. The rate was \$15/month for each school-age child who was not in school. That was a lot of money, given that many had large families.

In addition to the fines, the people now also had to pay taxes to support the public schools, even while they still paid fees to keep their own private schools going. Some families in the Swift Current, Saskatchewan area who had not kept up with the fines received a visit from the police on the fall day when they were butchering animals for their winter's meat supply. The police took a lot of the meat and sold it in town to cover the unpaid fines. When it wasn't quite enough, they came back and took several cows, heifers and horses.⁶

When the provincial government started these harsh actions against the private schools, these conservative Mennonites made appeals. They first went to the provincial governments and explained their strong convictions about having their schools under church auspices and having religious teachings alongside teachings in practical matters. They said, "do not judge our schools by how well they prepare children for getting ahead in the larger society; that is not our objective; judge our schools by how well they prepare children for our way of life in our communities."⁷ The Mennonites also referred to the letter from the federal government, given to them in 1873, which promised them complete freedom in matters of education and schooling.

At first the provincial governments were surprised by this federal government letter. But they quickly took the position that the promise in that letter meant nothing because the constitution, namely the British North America Act of 1867, gave authority over education to the provincial governments, not to the federal government. The Mennonites then went to the federal government but that government now took a similar view. Some Mennonites also took the matter to court. Eventually, the highest court for Canada, which at that time was not the Supreme Court of Canada but a Judicial Committee in London, England, confirmed that the provincial governments could do as they pleased in matters of education.

The conservative Mennonites were shocked. They had always believed that governments were instituted by God and that therefore their word was inviolate. Now they were being told that a key promise on which they had relied when they decided to move to Canada, meant nothing. It did

not take them long to realize that if they wanted to continue to have private schools, they would have to leave Canada and find a new country.

Arranging the Exodus

(a) Seeking A New Land: These Mennonites then started sending delegations to look for a country with (i) large blocks of available land where they could again set up their communities, and (ii) a government that would again give them military exemption and complete freedom in education. The three Old Colony groups, meaning those in the Winkler area of Manitoba and the Swift Current and Hague areas of Saskatchewan, tried to work together. So too did four of the groups in the Bergthaler family of churches, meaning, from Manitoba, the Chortitzer in the East Reserve and the Sommerfelder in the West Reserve and, from Saskatchewan, the Sommerfelder at Swift Current and the Bergthaler by Hague. Altogether, from 1919 to 1921, these groups sent 17 delegations. One stayed away for seven months.⁸ It must have cost the churches a lot of money. The delegates travelled to Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Mexico. Several went to Quebec. At one point, the state of Mississippi in the United States looked promising. They even asked about northern Manitoba. In the end, only two places satisfied their two conditions, Mexico and Paraguay.

But to buy a large block of land meant that they had to sell a large amount of land. At first each group tried to sell its land as a block. To do this the individual owners signed over their legal titles to several church leaders. We can imagine that many farmers will have found it hard to sign over their land titles but most of the people in these groups did so. And the church leaders then entered into dealings with possible buyers. Since the quantities of land were so large (most groups had around 100,000 acres) the possible buyers were big companies.

Unfortunately, a number of the planned sales with big companies fell through. In the Swift Current area the Old Colony group entered into an agreement to sell—just over 100,000 acres, for \$5 million—to an American corporation. Then the corporation backed out. But the agent who had arranged the sale still wanted a substantial commission. The Mennonites felt his claims were unreasonable. He took the Mennonites to court. All the courts in Canada ruled in favour of the Mennonites, but the agent appealed to the Judicial Committee in London, England which ruled in his favour. The Mennonites ended up giving

him over 10,000 acres of land.

For the Old Colony people in the Hague area a planned deal also fell through, as it did for the Chortitzer in the Steinbach area of Manitoba. For both of these groups the problems of selling their land contributed to a delay of three or more years. During this time, a number of the people, including my two sets of grandparents, backed out of the plan to leave. They then started to send their children to the public schools. Some of the people who backed out did so because they had become very poor.

(b) Further Appeals to the Governments: While the church leaders worked at selling the land, they also made further appeals to the governments, if not to reinstate their full religious freedoms, then at least to suspend the practice of imposing fines for a few years so that the people could sell their land, dispose of their belongings and move away. In one such letter, Rev. John P. Wall from the Hague area of Saskatchewan wrote to the Premier, stating:

I feel myself compelled to come to you with my request in the name of our whole Church Council, as well as the whole community. As you will know well enough, our church, the so-called Old Colony Mennonite Church of Hague, Saskatchewan, has long been under pressure of the Saskatchewan School Attendance Act, which requires of us to send our children to the Public Schools, to which we cannot consent on account of our conscience ... But since these exemptions [given by the Dominion government in 1873] have been taken away from us by the Provincial Government ... we felt ourselves compelled to look around whether we could find a place anywhere in this world where we could find and enjoy those privileges lost here. And thanks be to God, ... we have succeeded in finding these in another country. ... And therefore we have deemed it our sacred duty to leave our beloved country and to submit ourselves and our children to the great inconvenience and material loss unavoidably created thereby - as our forefathers did when they left Russia - and try to get there where we have been offered that which we have lost here... But such is not a matter which can be accomplished in a short time, particularly under the present financial depression that rests on nearly the whole world [and] poor crops of the last few years. ... there are many who are weakened so much in financial respect through the many, many prosecutions that it is a very great loss to the country, especially to the District,

*since they have been unable to do their farming according to the usual good methods. Yes, many of them could not support themselves any more and would be in need and misery if they had not been supported by others. But the credit is exhausted and paying school fines will eventually cease. And when the farmers are deprived of their working stock they cannot do their farming, as much as they want to do it. Therefore, we direct our most submissive petition to you and through yourself to the Hon. Gentlemen of the Provincial Government: Have mercy with our poor people. God will reward you for it. If you cannot keep the exemption that was granted to our people, please give us a few years in which to settle our affairs we pray.*⁹

Other prominent people also raised their voices. W.W. Cooper, a businessman in Swift Current, reported that it seemed likely that a sizeable emigration would take place, and that since “there are a number of families reduced to destitution through the fines being imposed upon them”, perhaps

an arrangement whereby they could retain their private schools but teach English, then the emigration plans would be set aside.¹¹

A. J. E. Summer, a real estate agent in Saskatoon, appealed to the Premier stating:

*This movement, if allowed to take place will be a serious economic loss to the West, and to a lesser degree to the Dominion as a whole, ... An extensive trip of inspection ... has prompted me to ask whether it is necessary that thousands of the best farmers Canada possesses should be allowed to leave in this manner. Twenty-five years in the history of the nation are nothing but that time would suffice to prove that the present matters of contention would solve themselves. I suggest that even at this late date an effort be made to avert this migration.*¹²

Another person, J. N. Doerr, who had taught in a public school near a Mennonite settlement wrote that while the public schools were superior in those many things which are considered necessary for this materialistic age, the Mennonite private



The arrival of Manitoba Old Colony Mennonites in the Cuauhtémoc area in 1923. The photo captures the excitement and confusion of arriving in a new land. Photo: Preservings 16 (2000), 44.

the government should consider “that the School Attendance Act not be forced for a period of about two years ... to give the families that leave the country an opportunity to get away”¹⁰ Henry Vogt, a lawyer in Swift Current, appealed to the Premier that his further discussions with Old Colony leaders had persuaded him that they would not object to teaching the English language but that they opposed the school system which the government was attempting to force upon them. They feared that it would eventually change the church, even on the basic teaching of military service. Vogt argued that if the government would offer

schools were superior in “the science of human relations”. He condemned the intolerance in society, praised the Mennonites for not contributing to the prison population and for their ability as farmers, and called on the government to work out a compromise so that the Mennonites would stay.¹³

The governments did not bend. Eventually, between 1922 and 1927, 7,735 people moved to Latin America; nearly 6,000 to Mexico and the others to Paraguay. All the Old Colony people moved to Mexico, joined there by 600 Sommerfelder from Manitoba and Swift Current. The Chortitzer, other Sommerfelder from Manitoba

and just over two hundred Bergthaler from Hague, Saskatchewan moved to Paraguay.¹⁴

Further Perspectives on the Mennonites

It must have been a very difficult time for the Mennonite people. How to decide whether to move or to stay. Friends and families will have become divided. Young people looking forward to marriage will have become separated. A great uncle of mine is said to have paced the floor at night struggling with his doubts on the one hand, and his faith that 'surely, God would not allow the church to be in error on this matter', on the other hand.

As the long chartered trains pulled away from the familiar prairie towns, those on board will have known that things might be hard in their new homelands, but few will have imagined just how hard. In Paraguay they had to wait in the port city for over a year before they were allowed to move to their land. During this time over one hundred people died in a disease epidemic. In Mexico, a large sum of money, brought from Canada and deposited in a bank, disappeared.¹⁵ Learning how to grow crops in the different soil was more complicated than expected. Markets were not as accessible. Farm animals were subject to strange diseases. The people must have had tremendous faith and courage.

Also, since the people were human, there was bickering, disunity, and criticism of leaders. Some returned to Canada. In his 1970 book, *Auswanderung Der Reinlander Mennoniten Gemeinde von Canada nach Mexico*, Ältester Isaac M. Dyck expresses sympathy for the people but he also indicates his belief that suffering and hardship are an inherent part of living as faithful people. He compared their situation to that of the Israelites, wandering in the desert after God had brought them out from Egypt. Some of the Israelites grumbled and complained and looked back. So too did some of the Mennonites in Mexico. Being a leader in that context had been difficult for Moses and it was hard for him and his fellow ministers in Mexico. But the call was clear.

Ältester Dyck's comparison of the Mennonite situation with that of the wandering Israelites is noteworthy. Most of us would agree that this earth is not our ultimate destination but we tend not to see our time here as a pilgrimage, as a journey of hardships that have to be endured, in quite the way that Ältester Dyck seems to.

Dyck also made a striking observation about the school issue, stating:

We could hear the peoples and nations

of this world preparing anew for war, more vigorously than ever before, to counteract the unprecedented military might of Germany... That might itself have originated in the classrooms where militarism and the arts of war were implanted in the students with unquenching zeal ... And this example Canada wanted to follow ... The rationale for the public schools was expressed with the following slogan: one king, one God, one navy, one all-British empire."¹⁶

Certainly, these words carry a lot of truth. There was a very strong patriotic atmosphere in the public schools. My father, a school boy in the 1920s, has talked of how at the beginning of each day they had to march, in military fashion, into the classroom and salute the flag and sing patriotic songs, etc. This was not in harmony with Mennonite teachings. It is very understandable that the church had concerns.

A key issue was who would control the schools, the government or the church. Another way of stating it was, to whom do the children belong, to the state or to the parents and the church. The *Winnipeg Free Press* said: "The children are the children of the state of which they are destined to be citizens; and it is the duty of the state to see that they are properly educated."¹⁷ This 'hard line' helps to explain why some compromise offers from these Mennonites were not accepted. A particularly significant offer came from the Chortitzer church in Manitoba in 1920. They said they were willing to accept most of government curriculum materials, to teach the English language, and to ensure that their teachers met government's standards. But they wanted a little time to make the transition. Unfortunately, the government held that this was not adequate. E. K. Francis, a primary scholar of these events, has written:

it was no more a question of educational standards which prompted the authorities to destroy [the parochial schools] once and for all, and to replace them with English public schools. It was part of a consistent national policy aimed at the assimilation of ethnics to safeguard national unity and cultural uniformity."¹⁸

These words from Ältester Dyck, E. K. Francis and the *Winnipeg Free Press*, are strong and categorical. They present the issue in black and white terms. At one level this is appealing. And to a large extent they are true. But before we accept them as the last words on the situation, we should ask ourselves, how then could the

majority of the Mennonites in Canada send their children to those schools? Had they all abandoned the faith? We know that many of them also had serious concerns but they still enrolled their children.

I believe the groups that moved to Latin America, especially the Old Colony groups, had a particular understanding of the call to live as a separate people. The above quoted words from Ältester Dyck about being a pilgrim people suggest this, as does their stance back in Russia toward the changes there. It is evident also in two communications with government representatives recounted in a report by Rev. Johan Loeppky of the Hague Old Colony group, about his 1921 trip to Mexico.¹⁹ The first communication was with Saskatchewan government officials long before they moved to Mexico. It dealt with the school issue and Loeppky says: "they offered us if we would teach some English in our German school, even if only one hour a day, they would let us have our old ways. Yet we feared this compromise."²⁰

When I read this I was surprised that the church had rejected what to me seemed like a generous offer from the government. In fact, I was surprised that the government had made such an offer. I then called my father who, though not an adult at the time, recalls how things were recounted from those years. He said that offer could have been made early on in the encounter, but that later, at least after 1917, the government had insisted on much more. He also felt that the church's rejection of it was in keeping with the mind-set of that time.

The second communication took place in Mexico, in 1921, when the Mennonite delegation met with the President and later with a senior minister. In both of these meetings they were asked to plan on teaching the Spanish language in their schools at some point. And both times the delegation respectfully rejected these requests. They feared that then their young people would mingle with the local Spanish people more easily.²¹ They wanted to remain a separate people. The call to be a separate people has a long history among Mennonites, though we have differed on what it meant and on how to live it out. These emigrating Mennonites had a particular understanding of that call.

We should also acknowledge that there was an element of group control. For a number of years when public schools first appeared in nearby towns, those Old Colony members who wanted to send their children to them faced excommunication.²² Some tried to withdraw their membership from the church so as not to

be excommunicated. (If store owners were excommunicated, as several were, - not for having stores but for sending their children to public schools - then people from the church would not do business with them.) But people were not allowed to withdraw their membership from the church once they had become members, something that most people did in their late teens. Later, when the groups prepared to move away, those who chose not to move were informed that they were no longer in the church.²³ These exclusionary actions had an effect on the people that few of us today can imagine. I take no pleasure in recounting these questionable aspects of the Mennonite side of the story but I feel that we must take them into account too.

Concluding Thoughts

We began by posing three tentative answers to the question of why the Mennonites moved to Latin America. There is no doubt in my mind that the first answer, namely that the governments of the time were too zealous and too harsh in forcing the public schools, is the primary reason for the emigration. It was a very bad policy.

The second answer refers to the possible responsibility of the church leaders. I believe this also contains elements of truth. I don't see those leaders as power-hungry dictators. For the most part they were sincere in following Biblical teachings as they understood them, but they understood the teaching about being a separate people in a particular way. And some of the methods they used, at that time and in later decades, to keep people in that separate way of life, are questionable, though we must add that most Old Colony churches no longer use such methods.

What about the third answer that we posited, namely that the emigration was the will of God? I have no difficulty in saying that the firm stand of these Mennonites against the public schools, as they were at that time, was a valid Christian response.

I am grateful to them for taking that stand, despite the great cost. This is not to say that the responses of other Mennonites were unchristian; only that theirs was legitimate. Also, to say that their critique may have been of God, is not to say that everything they did in their new homelands was of God. But even there they have made significant contributions and they may make more in the future.

Finally, I want to suggest that whether we can clarify the reasons why these groups moved and whether we can come to a full agreement on those reasons, may not be the most important thing. We know that that move, while bringing some positive things, has also brought a great deal of brokenness. The people who stayed and those who moved tended to think the worst of each other. And in Mexico, more so than in Paraguay, many things did not work out as the people had hoped. A significant portion of the people became impoverished and the education systems remained very limited. Many social problems resulted.

This is not to say that there are no problems among those of us who stayed. We know well that not everything in our families, our churches and our individual lives is as it should be. But it provides a context for lifting up what I feel is even more important than getting an exact understanding of the causes of the migration; that more important thing is the call to work for reconciliation which is so basic in the New Testament. This call reflects the desire of God to restore, to redeem, and to heal all the things that are broken. This includes all things relating to Low German Mennonites and indeed all Mennonites.

One of the most moving images of the call to reconciliation is the New Testament story of the shepherd who leads his sheep into the sheepfold at night and then realizes that some are missing, lost amid the shrubs and rocks in the hills. He then goes out and looks for them and brings them in.

I know that the calling to be such a

shepherd is the calling to which all of you are giving yourselves, albeit in many different ways. May God bless you in this important work for many years to come.

Endnotes

- 1 The letter appears in E. K. Francis, *In Search Of Utopia*, 2nd ed., (Steinbach: Crossway Publications, 2001), 74.
- 2 E.K. Frances, 78.
- 3 Quoted in E. K. Francis, p. 79.
- 4 Quoted in Adolf Ens, *Subjects or Citizens? The Mennonite Experience in Canada, 1870 - 1925*, (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1994), 26.
- 5 William Janzen, *Limits on Liberty: The Experience of Mennonite, Hutterite and Doukhobor Communities in Canada*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 92.
- 6 Ens, 145.
- 7 The fullest account of their philosophy of schooling is set forth in a six page submission made in February 1919 by the Old Colony Mennonite church to the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba. This particularly elaborate submission is available in several archives including those at the Mennonite Heritage Centre in Winnipeg. It is also an attachment in my dissertation, "The Limits of Liberty in Canada: The Experience of Mennonites, Hutterites, and Doukhobors," Political Science, Carleton University, Ottawa, 1981.
- 8 Ens, 204 and 210.
- 9 Quoted in William Janzen, "The 1920s Migration of Old Colony Mennonites from the Hague-Osler Area of Saskatchewan to Mexico," *Preservings*, 26 (2006): 70.
- 10 Janzen, *Limits on Liberty*, 108.
- 11 Janzen, *Limits on Liberty*, 109.
- 12 Janzen, *Limits on Liberty*, 109.
- 13 Janzen, *Limits on Liberty*, 112.
- 14 Ens, 214.
- 15 H. L. Sawatzky, *They Sought A Country: Mennonite Colonization in Mexico*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 128.
- 16 Quoted and translated in Frank H Epp, *Mennonites in Canada: The History of a Separate People, 1786 - 1920*, (Toronto: MacMillan of Canada, 1974), 346.
- 17 Quoted in Ens, 155.
- 18 Quoted in Ens, 145.
- 19 An English translation of this report is: Johann Loepky, "Journal on a Trip to Mexico, 1921" in *Preservings*, 26 (2006), 37-44.
- 20 Loepky, 37.
- 21 Loepky, 43.
- 22 See Ens, 114 and Janzen, "The 1920s Migration...", 66.
- 23 Ens, 216.

A Letter from John Henry Black

By Bruce Wiebe, Winkler, Mb.

The following letter was written by Morden lawyer John Black and published in the April 14, 1926 edition of the local newspaper, the *Morden Times*. Black had just visited the Mennonites in Mexico and the letter was written to counter the negative reports circulating in southern Manitoba

about them. His writing speaks for itself and clearly reveals his appreciation for, and positive relationship with the Old Colony Mennonites.

John Henry Black was born July 15, 1866 at Kildonan, Manitoba. His father John Black Senior, was the first

Presbyterian Minister west of the Great Lakes, sent from Scotland to serve the Selkirk Settlers at Red River. His mother, Henrietta Ross, was the daughter of pioneer Northwest fur trader, Alexander Ross and Sally, his aboriginal wife, daughter of an Okanagan Chief. Young John was raised

in the Church Manse and received his early education in Kildonan, later graduating in Arts from St. John's College. In 1886 he began his law studies in Winnipeg. He came to Morden in 1889 and qualified as a Solicitor in 1891, entering into partnership with J.B. McLaren. He was in law practice in Morden until his death on January 3, 1935. Although he married in 1892, he had no children. He was a supporter of the Presbyterian Church where he attended regularly and then also the United Church created after its union with the Methodists in 1925. He was an elected Elder of the latter in 1926 and sometimes conducted services when the Minister was absent. As well, he was active and influential at the provincial level of the Church. For years he led a well attended Morden Community Men's Bible class. In the community he also served as a Director on the Hospital Board, School Trustee, and member of the Board of Trade. He was well read and followed current affairs but was also known as an avid curler and a keen hunter. In his professional capacity he had a good relationship with individual Mennonites in the West Reserve and provided valuable service to them and their institutions.

The level of trust that he established with Church and Colony leadership was evidenced at the time of the emigration to Mexico when he was appointed their exclusive agent to sell the properties of those intending to leave. Although unable to complete such a sale in the one year time frame envisioned, he had been entrusted to negotiate such sales at the best prices. Three years later he was still negotiating with potential buyers on behalf of the Mennonite community. During 1923 and 1924 when Mennonite parents were being fined for not sending their children to Government imposed District Schools, John Black was active on their behalf. On March 5, 1924 he accompanied a Mennonite delegation to a meeting with the Provincial Minister of Education and was successful in obtaining a 10-month reprieve from further prosecutions to allow the emigrants more time to dispose of their properties. His empathy with the plight of the Old Colony Mennonites concerning education comes across in the letter, but in private correspondence he is more forthright and refers to the 10 month reprieve as "real freedom from prosecution."

Black was a perceptive man and had strong principles. In 1925, just prior to the departure of the Waisenamt he suggested to the administrators that deposits of Mennonites remaining in Manitoba should be left here in another Waisenamt, Trust Company,

or some place where the funds would be safe, in order that all would be satisfied and the Church protected from future trouble. Unfortunately, his advice was ignored. Black was, however, entrusted to look after Waisenamt assets in Manitoba and was in regular written contact with the administrators in Mexico about outstanding accounts. By 1931, when it became clear that collections in Manitoba would fall far short of the fund's liabilities and the Waisenamt was suggesting bankruptcy in Manitoba, Black regretfully complied. He recognized that many of the creditors did not have the means to pay, and the Waisenamt did not authorize legal action to collect from them. He anticipated more lawsuits against the Waisenamt by those owed amounts from the trust funds assets. (no evidence of there ever having been an assignment in bankruptcy has been located.) That John Black was perceived as a representative of the Old Colony in Mexico is evidenced by a visit he received from Isaac Sirluck of Winkler who owned the property on which the Old Colony Church building in Chortitz was located. Sirluck wanted to collect \$48 in rent for the previous four years. Black obliged by communicating this to the Waisenamt in writing. He kept informed about his friends in Mexico and took note of illnesses and deaths, extending sympathies or well wishes for health in his correspondence. It is regrettable that none of Black's files appear to have survived in Manitoba, but what information we have comes from incomplete correspondence files preserved by the Waisenamt in Mexico.

Perhaps the mutual trust and respect between lawyer John Black and the Old Colony Mennonites lay in their similarities reinforced by a strong Christian faith. Through his Aboriginal heritage he may have identified with their minority status and suffering through broken Government promises. The adjectives listed by Black in the letter could just as well apply to him: "sturdy character, sterling honesty, generous hospitality, and genial comradeship."

Mennonites in Mexico

Morden Times April 14, 1926

To the Editor of the Times:

Since my return from the South I have been repeatedly questioned as to the condition and progress of the Old Colony Mennonites who migrated to Mexico. As the interest in the matter seems to be widespread I venture to think that the public generally would welcome some details and impressions.

The migration from Manitoba began in 1922 and is still continuing. At the present time there are about 3,100 of our former countrymen in Mexico, and on the 21st inst. another contingent expects to take its departure and this will practically complete the movement.

The new home of these people is located in the State of Chihuahua (pronounced Chewah-wah) which is the most northerly state in the republic, and is separated from the United States mainly by the Rio Grande River. Its capital bears the same name as the state and is situated 265 kilometres south of El Paso, Texas, from which it is reached by the Mexican National railway. From El Paso to Chihuahua the country is literally almost all desert. At the stations along the line there are a few adobe huts but how their counterparts glean a living was a problem nobody whom I asked could solve.

I arrived at Chihuahua at midnight, and at seven the next morning boarded a train on the Mexican North Western railway (a Canadian owned road by the way) for San Antonio 133 kilometres to the west and being the station nearest to the Mennonite colony. This San Antonio (there are nine others in the state) will not be found on any ordinary map. For one reason, it was a place of no account until the new settlers began coming in, but it has now a population of about 400 and is growing rapidly.¹ It is situated on high ground—probably a good deal higher than the hill immediately west of Morden—and looking northerly from it one got a very fine panoramic view of the new Mennonite settlement on a considerably lower level.²

The southerly limit of the Reserve is about four miles from San Antonio, and the village closest is Blumenort. It is a coincidence that Blumenort in Mexico occupies the same relative position to San Antonio as Blumenort in Manitoba does to Gretna. The territory comprising the Reserve extends northerly for a distance of about 80 miles, and is in the form of a great oval from twelve to twenty miles in diameter. On either side and converging but not meeting at the northern end are towering mountain ranges, the new settlement being thus really in a valley but its surface is as level as that of the Manitoba Reserve. Three or four miles further on from the northern end the Swift Current Colony begins. Approaching San Antonio on the train from the east some of the villages could be seen in the distance, the tin roofs of the buildings flashing in the mid-day sun. Strung along in more or less regular succession from south to north the villages (some 28 in number) dot the landscape and present an interesting

and attractive appearance. In the matter of nomenclature I found the Mennonites had clung to the old familiar Manitoba names, and so here in Mexico we have Chortitz and Schanzenfeld and Osterwick and Reinland and all the rest.

I was fortunate in finding a banker friend in San Antonio who with his amiable wife most hospitably entertained me during my stay, and kindly placed his car at my disposal, thus enabling me to range over the Reserve at my leisure. My chief object in going to Mexico was to visit the Mennonites and see how they were getting along. During my long years of intercourse with them I had made the acquaintance of hundreds, and many of them I regard as valued friends. Their sturdy character, sterling honesty, generous hospitality and genial comradeship have left an indelible impression on my mind. It is needless to say it was a great pleasure to meet them again, and without egotism I think I can say the pleasure was mutual. During my visit I inspected many of the villages, saw the farms, examined the buildings, took note of the improvements, conversed with the people, heard of their experiences and caught their perspective. Right here let me say the whole thing was a revelation.

We have all heard the rumors and reports that have drifted through from Mexico from time to time as to the plight and circumstances of these people. Much has come to us that has been unfavorable in its tenor. We have been told of hardships and sufferings and epidemics and death. We have heard of a flinty and unpromising soil—so hard and dry that it had to be attacked with pick-axes—of a water supply that was exceedingly meager—of the probability of violence and pillage at the hands of the natives—and of many other factors that threw a sinister glamour over the whole enterprise that these expatriated people had undertaken. Now after having made a personal investigation I am ready to express my views on the matter.

In the first place let it be remembered what the nature of the movement was. The Mennonites emigrated to a new country 2500 miles from their former home, having a climate and conditions, laws and customs entirely different from those to which they were accustomed, and moreover they became domiciled in the heart of a nation of whose language and habits they knew nothing. In other words they were pioneers in a strange land, removing thither to establish themselves as a Community and begin life all over again. Their moral right to remain in Manitoba under the expressed assurance of the Dominion government was

indisputable—their legal right to remain and continue their own schools was non-existent—their expatriation a tragedy.

Naturally at the outset of their colonization in Mexico there were numberless difficulties to overcome—there were no houses to live in and they had to be built; no wells to furnish water and they had to be dug; no gardens with a vegetable supply and they had to be prepared; no ploughed fields ready for the seed, and mother Earth had to be broken and cultivated; no fences, roads nor any of the conveniences so commonplace that their existence is almost overlooked. To surmount these handicaps and provide what was needed for thousands of people necessitated an enormous amount of labor—labor which could not be postponed—and of course there was a congestion of work. Is it any wonder we heard stories of trials and hardships and rough experiences? Such are inseparable from the establishment of a whole community in a new territory in a State of Nature.

Now I can say what I found. I found the houses, the wells, the gardens, the ploughed fields, the fences, the roads and other conveniences all there. To me it was simply amazing the extent of the building, cultivation, road making and improvements generally which the people have accomplished in four short years. On my first day in the Reserve I made a round trip of over 50 miles inspecting many villages, entering many homes, and taking in as best I could the whole situation, and all my preconceived ideas of seeing nothing but raw pioneer crudity were shattered. On the other hand I saw the villages built after the fashion of the builders' forefathers—that is, in the same style as in Manitoba—comfortable homes, large barns, well set out gardens and a surprising amount of breaking—considering the limited time the newcomers have had—and most significant of all, a happy and contented people. The latter is not an exaggeration, for out of numberless interviews I met only two men who expressed any doubt as to the wisdom of the Mexican venture. During the past year 200,000 bushels of grain were raised and I expect that in 1926 there will be half a million. In future years, as additional areas are brought under the plow, the crop will run into millions. The soil, contrary to many reports is unquestionably rich, and the rainfall, regarding the absence of which we heard so much, is ample. Indeed there was altogether too much in 1925. Negotiations are now on for the erection of elevators at San Antonio. Mexicans do not know what an elevator is when they see it—there are none in Mexico. So far

as markets are concerned the Mennonites have had no cause for worry. Everything they produce is snapped up as soon as it is offered for sale, and on a cash basis at remunerative prices. I venture to predict that in ten years or less—barring political troubles—the Mennonite Community in Mexico will be wealthier than it ever was in Manitoba, and that is saying a good deal.

So far only one church has been erected, and it is at Neuenberg the residence of Bishop Friesen, but schools have been built in most, if not all, the villages, and are being used for religious services until the Churches can be put up. There has been no interference of any kind with the work of the schools, and no indication of any.

To found the New Colony and before any emigration took place the Old Colony Church (that is, this Mennonite Community) purchased for the purpose of its settlement in the present location 173,000 acres of land for approximately \$1,250,000. Of this big sum \$1,125,000 has been paid, leaving the comparatively small balance of \$125,000 still to be met. Comment on this achievement is unnecessary.

Much has been said about unsettled political conditions in Mexico, and the bearing they might have on the new colonists. I can only report what I saw. I saw no present evidences of political turmoil or revolution. The government now in power is a stable one and the country generally is in a tranquil state. The Mennonites have suffered no losses by banditry or pillage and have no complaints to make against their new countrymen.

Last fall the President of the Republic made the Mennonites an official visit, and was delighted with the advancement they had made, and the character of the people, and assured them of his sincere good will and sympathy.

My general conclusion is that the Mennonites are making and will make a notable success of their new Colony, and what will prove a distinct gain to Mexico will prove a distinct loss to Manitoba.

Yours truly,
J.H. Black
Morden, Man., April 7, 1926.

Endnotes

1 San Antonio de los Arenales was the original name of the present day city of Cuauhtémoc. According to the 2005 Census the city' had a population of 98,725. Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática. —ed.

2 The elevation of Cuauhtémoc is 2020 m, Morden is 302 m and the escarpment just west of the town is approximately 200 meters higher. —ed.

Cornelius Krause Mexico Photo Collection

By Conrad Stoesz, Mennonite Heritage Centre, Winnipeg
and John J. Friesen, Canadian Mennonite University

At a family roots genealogy day in 2002 at the Mennonite Heritage Village in Steinbach, Manitoba Jac Doerksen showed me, Conrad Stoesz, a large number of photographs of Mexico taken in 1923. Some of

the photos were long panorama-style photos which measured 33 x 10 cm. Most of them were badly faded. I was excited to see these photos as I had not seen such early photos of the Mennonite areas in Mexico before.

Doerksen's grandfather, Cornelius Krause of the Chortitzer Mennonite Church, together with Jacob Froese and P.A. Friesen of the Reinlaender Mennonite Church in Manitoba, took a trip to Mexico



This group of men inspecting the land included delegates from Manitoba and as well as Mennonites who had already settled in Mexico. Oct. 20, 1923.



A village street of Neuenberg, Manitoba Old Colony settlement near Cuauhtemoc, with farmyards on each side. This village was begun within the past twelve months. June 24, 1923.



Newly built home of Abraham Doerksen, bishop of the Sommerfeld Mennonite Church, who lead the group to Santa Clara the year before. May 12, 1923.

in 1923. They all had relatives in the two new Mennonite settlements of Santa Clara established by the Sommerfelder Mennonite Church, and the Manitoba Old Colony settlement near Cuauhtemoc founded by the Reinlaender Mennonite Church. Both churches originated in Manitoba. (The church, which in Manitoba was called the

Reinlaender Mennoniten Gemeinde, called itself the Old Colony Mennonite Church when it moved to Mexico and reorganized.) Ever since, all the churches that originated from the Manitoba Reinlaender Mennonite Church, whether they were in Mexico, Manitoba, or Saskatchewan, or in various Central and South American countries

where they migrated, called themselves Old Colony.)

Froese and Friesen were Reinlaender Mennonite Church members who had not yet made up their minds about moving to Mexico even though most of their fellow church members had decided to move. Krause was a member of the Chortitzer



Inspecting land in a forested area near Santa Clara, where Sommerfeld Mennonite Church members had already settled. July 2, 1923.



Inspecting the land by automobile. Aug. 15, 1923.

Mennonite Church in Manitoba, which had decided to move to Paraguay, but was delayed because of difficulties in selling its land. (They were only able to move to Paraguay in 1926.) While the Chortitzer were waiting for the move to Paraguay, some of them thought they might well

move to Mexico, where the Sommerfelder Mennonite church bishop and a portion of the church's members had settled the previous year. Since the Sommerfelder and Chortitzer churches were closely allied in theology and family ties, moving to Mexico seemed an attractive option for

some Chortitzer. Thus Krause decided, on his own, to check out the Mexico option.

These church groups, Sommerfelder, Chortitzer, and Reinlaender, decided to emigrate from Canada because they believed the Canadian government had reneged on its promise, made in 1873, to



Inspecting land in the Santa Clara region. Oct. 6, 1923.



A Mennonite from the Santa Clara settlement traveling by horse and buggy. Oct. 6, 1923.

give them control of their own schools. During World War I, when pro-war sentiment was very strong, the province of Manitoba reformed the school system. It closed all private schools, and changed the public schools from bilingual to English-only. This meant that Mennonites lost

control of their schools, and the school curriculum no longer served the goal of passing on their Christian faith and German language heritage. The Manitoba government specifically stated that the purpose of Manitoba schools was to teach national values, civic duty, and prepare young men

for service in the military. It was not the purpose of schools to serve the religious and community needs of Mennonites, nor of any other group. Mennonites saw this as a threat to their church's future, and some consequently began to search for settlement possibilities in countries that would



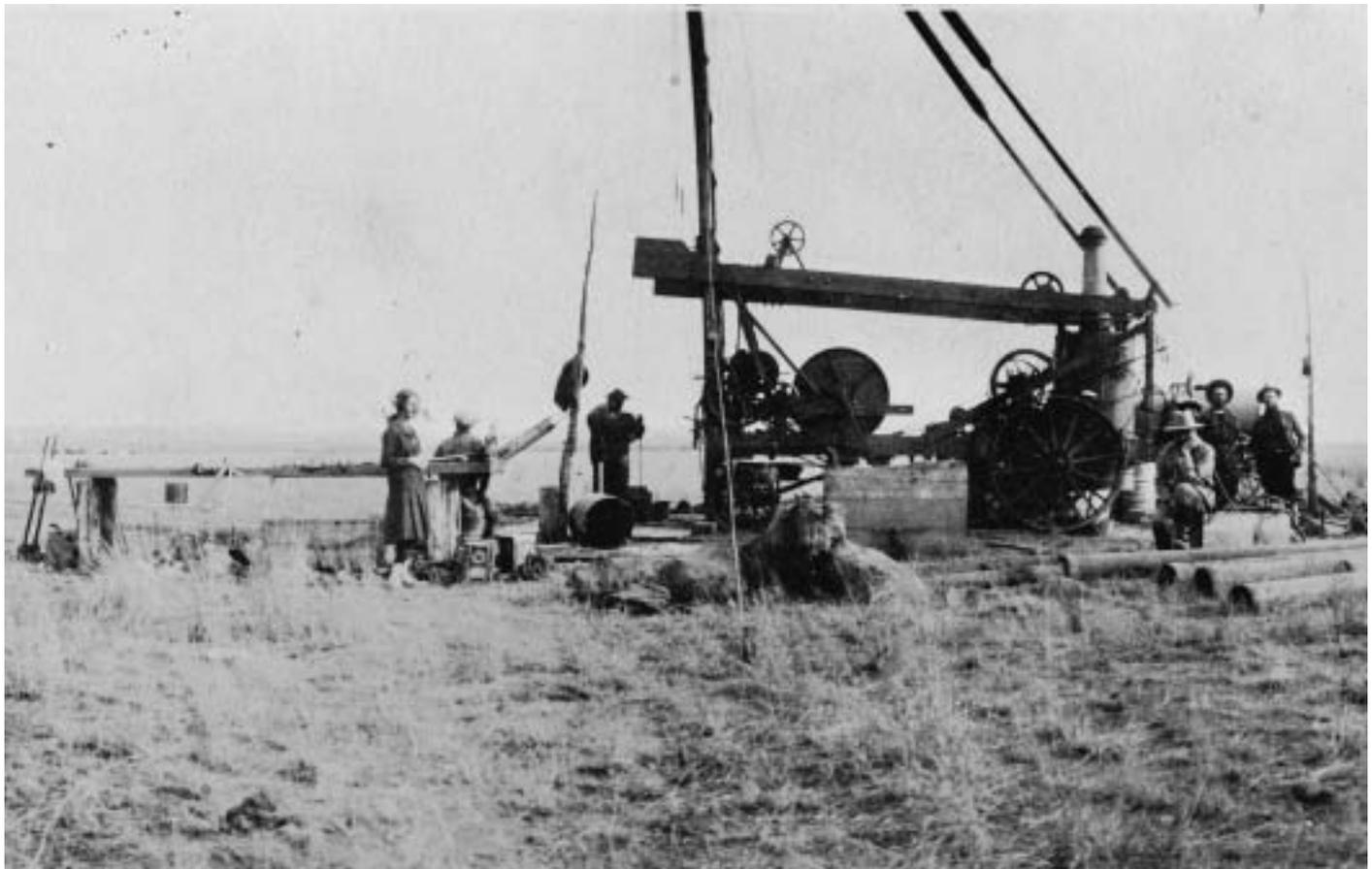
A group of Sommerfeld Mennonites from Santa Clara, Oct. 6, 1923.



Inspecting the land. Oct. 20, 1923.



A group, both delegates, and settlers from the year before, inspecting the land. Oct. 20. 1923.



Delegates watching well drilling on Sommerfeld Mennonite church lands in Santa Clara. Nov. 7 1923.

guarantee them control of their schools. Mexico and Paraguay were two countries that offered such assurances.

When Krause arrived in Mexico on his inspection trip, he was taken to various locations. The photos which Krause himself took show people and places he visited on this trip. (MHC collection 592). He identified some of the photos, including

the house of Sommerfeld Church bishop Abraham Doerksen, houses of some other church members, and of Krause himself. Other photos include orchards, livestock, machinery, and Mexican urban centres.

The photos in the wide panoramic style were given to Krause by a Mexican land agent, presumably in the hope of convincing more immigrants to Mexico. (MHC

collection 590) These panoramic photos were taken before the arrival of the Menonite delegation. They show road and railway construction, wide-open uncultivated areas, rivers and ponds, as well as villages, homes, and fields successfully developed by the Old Colony and Sommerfeld Menonites. Lot numbers are used and in a few cases villages and owners of the land are



Home of H. P. Klippenstein in the village of Waldeck, Santa Clara colony, near a building that looks like a store. May 12, 1923.



Men standing in an oat field near the village of Kronsthal, Manitoba Old Colony. This was the settlers' first crop in Mexico. Oct. 1923.

named. When people are depicted on the photos they are unidentified, and in many cases faces are not visible.

Cornelius Krause (1886-1968) was born in Manitoba on the Mennonite east reserve, near present day Steinbach to Johann Krause (1855-1941) and Katharina Kehler (1852-1935). Johann and Katharina came to Canada in 1875 with their respective families from the Bergthal colony, Russia, in search of religious freedom. In 1905

Cornelius married Maria Rempel (1884-1939) in the Chortitzer Mennonite Church and together they had four children, three of whom survived into adulthood.

This trip by Krause was not an official investigation trip sponsored by the Chortitzer Mennonite Church, but rather a private undertaking. No emigration to Mexico resulted from his efforts. The Chortitzer Mennonite Church remained steadfast in its decision to move to Paraguay. As

mentioned earlier, the move to Paraguay finally took place in 1926.

These photos are thus an early insight into the geography, life and world in Mexico into which some Mennonites had moved, and which others were in the process of checking out. It is the largest known early collection of photos of these settlements in Mexico.



Home of H. Hildebrand, Kleefeld, Manitoba Old Colony settlement, 1923.



A team of oxen hitched to a plow. Pioneer farming in Mexico. 1923.



A group of Mennonites displaying their first garden produce in Mexico. 1923.



A windmill used to pump water for cattle. Windmills were a common sight in all Mennonite villages in this area. 1923.



A view of a city street in Chihuahua, the capital city of the state by the same name. Both the Santa Clara and Manitoba Old Colony Mennonite settlements were within this state. 1923.



A sod turning ceremony for an unidentified building with Mr. Froese turning the symbolic first sod. 1923.

Impressions of Manitoba Colony, 2008

by Hans Werner

It was sunny but still a little cool in the evenings when the group of MCC workers from Canada that I had joined landed in Chihuahua and made its way to the Mennonite area near Cuauhtémoc. The flight from Houston to Chihuahua arrived in the evening and by the time we traveled to Cuauhtémoc it was dark and only a limited impression of the landscape was possible. We booked into the La Huerta Inn, a modern motel that in the dark seemed only to be somewhere beyond the city of Cuauhtémoc. We slept as well as any traveler can.

The first stop of our whirlwind visit to the Manitoba Colony was to the Biblioteca Menonita. Before Delbert Plett passed away he donated funds for the creation of a library in the Manitoba Colony. The attractive building serves as both a book store and library. MCC provided volunteers who helped establish a cataloguing system and at the time of our visit Franz Fehr reported that 250 books were on loan. The library serves an important purpose, but

also illustrates the tensions about language among Mennonites in Mexico. Most of the books in the library are in German. Should fluency in written and spoken Spanish be encouraged? In some of my conversations people lamented the need

to hire non-Mennonite Mexican women in the Credit Union and other offices because there were too few Mennonites, particularly women, who were fluent in Spanish and could staff these positions. What about the place of German in Mexican



The Biblioteca Colonia Manitoba was built with assistance from Delbert Plett. It is a library and bookstore located in Lowe Farm that serves the Old Colony Mennonites in the Manitoba Colony. Photo Credit: Hans Werner

Mennonite life? A few weeks after we left the Manitoba Colony German embassy officials were present in the colony, making their continued interest in fostering that language among the Mennonite people evident by providing funding for a project at the Museum. Others decry the emphasis on Low German, which pervades everyday exchange in the colony, but cannot be written or effectively used to conduct 'official' business.

Along with the challenges of language come the differing perspectives on education. The *Darpschoul*, (village school) an important part of every Campo is the main educational institution for many of the Old Colony children. There is however a continuing effort to make changes to the educational system among the Old Colony people. The *Schoulkommitee* (school committee) is actively working to provide teachers with resources and ideas to become more effective in teaching children what they need to learn to become members of their church and community. That process



The children in the Darpschoul in Shoental hard at work at their lessons under the watchful eye of their teacher, Jacob Harms.

is not without its challenges. Will changes to the way children are taught maintain the sense of community and belonging that will sustain Old Colony life into the future? Is there a danger that changes will only contribute to losing them to the world when they get older? Among the conservative Old Colony people these are difficult and controversial questions. One source estimated that about a quarter of Old Colony school children attend schools that are adopting the new ways of teaching that have been promoted by the School Committee. The Conference, Kleine Gemeinde, and some other groups have chosen a different path. The Conference schools, for instance are now registered with the State and their educational methods meet the requirements that the State demands, but they also seek to teach these in ways that remain true to their understanding of what it means to be a Mennonite Christian in modern Mexico.

As a Canadian observer familiar with thriving Southern Manitoba Mennonite



The Conference sponsored school at Blumenau teaches in High German and Spanish.

towns, I could not help but be impressed with the similarity of the four lane highway that cuts through the middle of the colony, with the four lane highway that joins Winkler and Morden. In the Manitoba Colony the highway is the pulsating artery of a thriving business environment. The industries and business establishments have all the characteristics of thriving Mennonite business acumen and work ethic. The technological sophistication of economic activity in the Manitoba colony leaves a lasting impression. It is possibly not surprising that the bustle and economic boom



A new strip mall along the four lane highway between Cuauhtémoc and Rubio boasts a coffee shop and a computer store.

that one sees on the 'strip' is not as evident when you travel to the villages further away from the four lane highway. Some of the agricultural enterprises are impressive, even to the knowledgeable observer. The cherry tomato greenhouses at Campo 105 in the Swift Colony sell all their production to a firm from Delta, British Columbia who distributes them throughout North America. The greenhouses used sophisticated technology to produce a product that looked and tasted delicious. The apple orchards produce quality apples for the Mexican

market. Peter Rempel's brand names were reminiscent of an earlier period of economic sophistication in Russian Mennonite economic life. Brand names like Juschan-lee, Molotschna, and Volga evoke images of the Johann Cornies era in Russia during the 1830s and 40s.

Our visit to the Mennonites near Cuauhtémoc also included traveling north through portions of the Swift Colony, then on to Nuevo Casas Grandes. After stopping at the MCC Centre in the city we went further north to the relatively remote colony of El Capulin. El Capulin was established in 1962 as a daughter of the Manitoba Colony



Tomato production at Campo 105 in the Swift Colony is done on a grand scale. These delicious tomatoes are being produced in a five acre complex with 80,000 cherry tomato plants.



The boxes of apples in the packing area of Peter Rempel's orchard.

and has about 300 families about 45 kilometers north of the city. Here a more common Mennonite economic situation greeted us. Farmland and farmers, milk and cheese, were the order of the day. The food safety crises that seem to come along regularly in Canada, in spite of our highly regulated food production processing activities, made one wonder how long the simple Mennonite cheese factories that are so common in rural Mexico can continue to operate. The rhythms of agricultural life were apparent everywhere. The milk cans were being returned to the farmers to be readied for the next day's milking and the last batches of cheese for the day were being formed into their characteristic rounds. Electricity came to El Capulin in 2000 and the changes to the colony seem to have been dramatic. Along with electricity came pickups with the horse-drawn buggy a distant memory, except for the regular reminder provided by the neighbouring Sabinal colony, which is the last horse and buggy colony in northern Mexico. There were also stories of problems, families that had lost their husband and father to alcohol abuse, and economic struggles due to the inability to acquire more water and high fuel prices that made pumping the water increasingly costly for those not on the electrical grid.

Mexico does not have a well developed social welfare state as we have become accustomed to in Canada. A visit to the home for the elderly, and the *Hoffungsheim* while encouraging, illustrated the difficulties of becoming old or suffering from disabilities. In Mexico it is a precarious thing to be unable to care for oneself, particularly if

there is no family to assist. In Mexico the initiative to establish social organizations among Mennonites to provide care, opportunity, and work to improve the quality of life for the elderly and disabled rests almost entirely with the community. That requires dedicated effort, money, and skill. We also visited the new addictions centre, a pleasing facility to provide rehabilitation for those suffering from substance addictions. Here the effort and dedication that is required is even greater. The problem of addiction is more serious in that it is viewed as a 'blot' on individual and family reputations, and on the community as a whole.

On Saturday, I went to the businessmen's breakfast at the restaurant near our motel. Here the tension created by the kidnapping of a Mennonite man a few weeks earlier was more apparent. The conversations among the assembled businessmen raised questions about how reliable the police investigation was. There were obvious worries about their own, and their

family's safety, given that they represented wealth and means in the colony. I even noted some worries about whether the time for Mennonites in Mexico had come to an end. Unspoken were considerations of being more active in insuring their own and their family's security. As a person aware of Mennonite history, I could not help but think that we had been here before. As the established order that Mennonites had relied upon for their prosperity crumbled in the aftermath of the revolution in Russia in 1917, Mennonites there had to answer difficult questions about their personal safety. As before, in Mexico it will be much easier to deal with one's own vulnerabilities, than those of one's family.

On Sunday we went to church. The two services we attended brought home the diversity of Mennonite life in the Manitoba Colony. First we attended the Old Colony Church in Steinbach where it was the day for the baptismal candidates to answer the questions of the catechism from memory. The service began an hour after sunrise as has been the tradition. The four men and eight women stood before the minister while he patiently asked them the questions and they answered. He then reminded them not to think of the recitation and the baptism that would follow in a few weeks as salvation. He also gently encouraged them to continue to meditate on what the questions meant and to follow in the ways of Jesus in the future. The second service we attended was in the Blumenau conference church. Here the service was much like any in a conference church in Canada before the transition to English. Here a group left after the introductory portion to attend a Spanish language worship service in another space in the building. Peter Zacharias, historian and retired pastor and conference minister was the speaker—a long ways to come to hear a fellow Manitoban give a sermon.

The next day it was back to Chihuahua, then Houston, Chicago, and home to Winnipeg.



The milk cans ready to be returned to the farmers from the cheese factory at El Capulin.

Articles

Influenza Pandemic Deaths among Manitoba Mennonites in 1918-19

Glen R. Klassen and Kimberly Penner
Canadian Mennonite University

The Spanish Flu epidemic arrived in the Mennonite reserves in late October, 1918 (Fig. 1). The first death of a “typical” victim on the East Reserve was that of Peter L. Kehler of Blumengart, a 24 year old who died on Nov. 8th (Fig. 2). By the first week of November, the death toll was rising dramatically, especially on the West Reserve (Fig. 3). The number of deaths peaked two weeks earlier in Rhineland and Stanley than it did in Hanover and Morris, perhaps because the virus arrived first on the West Reserve. It is interesting that Morris, which is between the source of the epidemic (presumed to be Winnipeg) and the West Reserve, should have been affected so much later. By the first week of December the worst was over, although there were still some flu deaths well into January, 1919.

The Mennonites were not taken by surprise because the epidemic had begun weeks earlier in Winnipeg. There the rapid early rise of deaths occurred in the last two weeks of October.¹ Mennonite newspaper correspondents had already been reporting the bad news south of the border for several weeks.² News of the deaths of relatives, even though far away, travels fast on the Mennonite grapevine.

During that horrible November more than half the population was very ill with the flu and within just four weeks there were just as many funerals as would normally occur in a whole year. Many extended families experienced at least one death and in a number of cases more than one family member died. In many cases, every person in a large family would be sick at the same time so that neighbours would have to take care of the farm animals during the worst of it. However, most families recovered without losing anyone to the flu. Some horror stories told about the Spanish flu probably are really about the recurring diphtheria outbreaks which could claim the children of whole families within a few months. The annual death rate

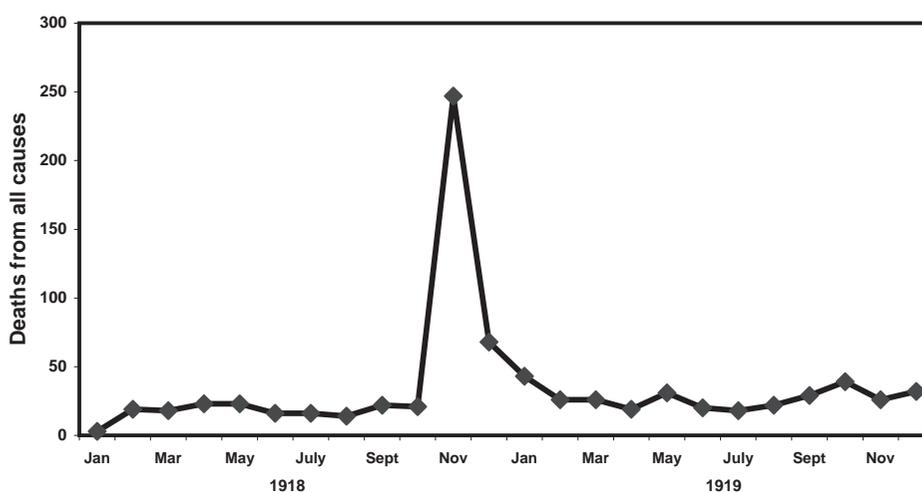


Figure 1. Total monthly deaths from all causes in Hanover, Morris, Rhineland, and Stanley in 1918-19. (Data compiled from Manitoba Vital Statistics <http://vitalstats.gov.mb.ca>.)

was actually higher in 1908 and 1910, due to diphtheria, than it was in 1918. The horror of the flu epidemic seems to have been due to its sudden onset, the many deaths within a short period of time, and the social disruption it caused.

The November outbreak in rural Manitoba is believed to have been a very severe wave of pandemic infection caused by the H1N1 strain of the influenza virus. This virus is spread rapidly from person to person by the respiratory mode of transmission. Every time an infected person talks, laughs, coughs or sneezes, he fills the surrounding air to a meter or so with tiny droplets of mucous which are inhaled by everyone within that radius. You need only be near someone with the flu to become infected. H1N1 was particularly dreaded because it preferentially killed young adults (age 20 to 40) and this was certainly true in the Mennonite reserves (Fig. 4).³ This is due to the curious fact that those with good health were most affected because their vigorous immune response was turned against them by the virus. The patient's white blood cells migrate to the lungs to fight the virus, but



Katharina and Peter L. Kehler, East Reserve. Peter died of the flu on November 8, 1918 and his one year old daughter Helena succumbed on November 13th. Photo Credit: Historical Sketches of the East Reserve.

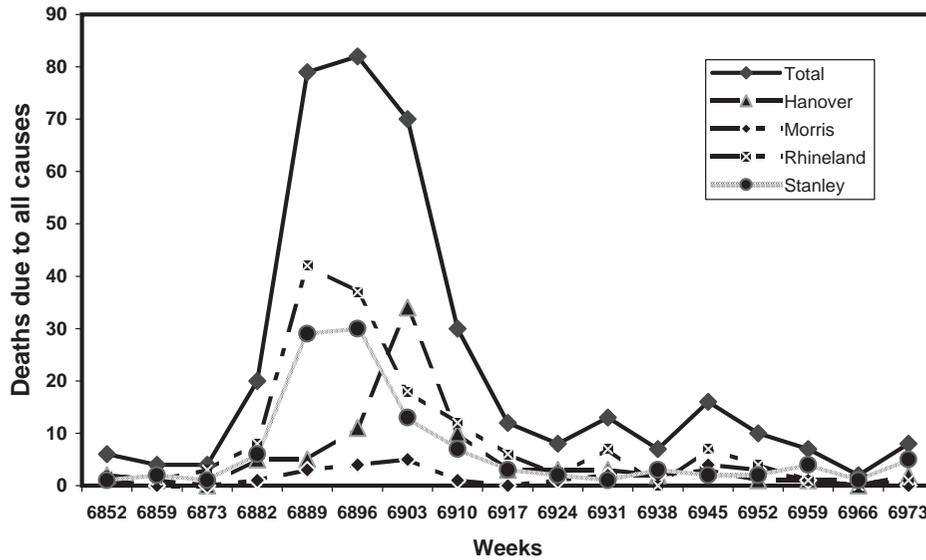


Figure 3. Weekly deaths from all causes in Hanover, Morris, Rhineland, and Stanley from the week of Oct. 10, 1918 to the week of Jan. 31, 1919.

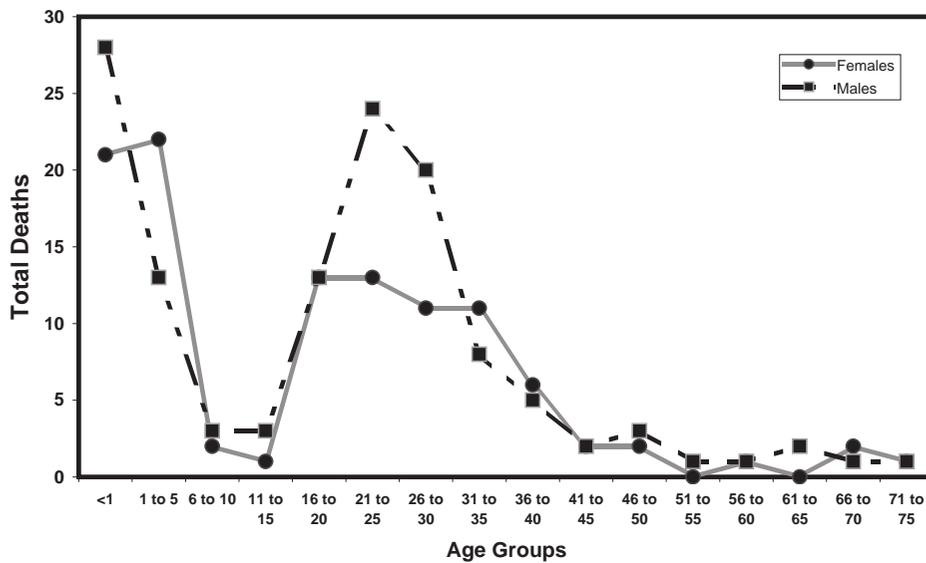


Figure 4. Deaths from all causes in November, 1918 in Hanover, Morris, Rhineland, and Stanley according to age and sex.

there are too many of them so they end up making breathing more difficult and filling the lungs with liquid. The current avian influenza threat is caused by the H5N1 strain, which has a similar mode of action. Annual flu epidemics occurred regularly, as they still do, but the 1918 one is still remembered for the special trauma it caused. In many cases, influenza progressed to bronchitis and pneumonia, and in fact, flu deaths statistics are inseparable from pneumonia death data. Underlying tuberculosis may also have contributed to the deaths of young adults. The spectre of an ordinary flu epidemic somehow transforming itself into a killer wave of sickness still haunts us today and it is this fear that inspired me

to study the 1918 episode to see if there is something we can learn to help us cope with the next one; and there surely will be another one.

Our focus on Mennonites in Southern Manitoba is due to the opportunity of studying a clearly defined population with well known social practises and conventions with the hope that something may be revealed about how such a group would experience an epidemiological crisis. We were particularly interested in how the Mennonite faith tradition would be affected.

Death Rates

In this preliminary study we decided to investigate just the death rates due to

influenza in 1918-19. It is assumed that the death rates (mortality) reflect the severity of the epidemic. A more complete study would also investigate how many people got sick (morbidity), but that would be a much more challenging task because there is virtually no reliable data available, especially for rural areas. Even if morbidity data was available, vast numbers of people who were sick in 1918 would not have been included.

Death rates can be relatively easily calculated because all of the death certificates from 1918-19 are available at Manitoba Vital Statistics and because detailed census data for 1916 and 1921 have been published. Our estimates of 16 south-central Manitoba municipal populations in 1918 as well the Mennonite populations within each one are given in Table 1.

To calculate death rates for a certain population you need the number of deaths in a certain period of time and the size of the population. This is usually expressed as deaths per 1000. A death rate of 5 means that 5 people died for every 1000 people in the population. It's the same as saying that 0.5 percent of the population died. Population sizes for 1918 and 1919 can

	Total	Mennonites
Hanover	4530	2678
Morris	4475	1752
Rhineland	9136	7417
Stanley	7492	4554
La Broquerie	1188	37
Ste Anne	2186	234
Stuartburn	4706	41
Taché	1878	370
De Salaberry	2581	57
Franklin	4168	9
Montcalm	2838	193
Roland	2205	465
Thompson	2085	41
Pembina	4368	24
Grey	3086	3
Dufferin	4175	0
Totals	61097	17875
Other Mennonites in Manitoba		362

*Data from Census of Canada, 1916 and 1921. Estimates for 1918 were done by mathematical interpolation assuming uniform population change over the 5 year period.

Table 1. Estimated populations of 16 south-central municipalities in Manitoba in 1918*.

be estimated by interpolation from those reported for 1916 and 1921. This assumes uniform population change between 1916 and 1921, which was not necessarily the case due to emigration, but because the most dramatic emigrations by Mennonites to Saskatchewan, Mexico and South America did not occur during this 5-year period, the population estimates for 1918 and 1919 should be reasonably accurate.⁴ It can also be seen from Table 1 that Mennonites had not spread far from their reserves in southern Manitoba by 1918. 90 percent still lived in the four original municipalities and most of the diaspora had not moved beyond contiguous municipalities such as Tache, Ste. Anne, Roland, and Montcalm. The boundary between the municipalities of Stanley and Rhineland was changed in 1916, fortunately in time for the 1916 census so that this did not confuse the data.

Deaths were counted by simply consulting Vital Statistics for the years 1918 and 1919. I have created a database of every recorded death in Stanley, Rhineland, Morris, and Hanover in those two years. The total is 825. From this list can be extracted the names of all those with recognizable Mennonite names.⁵ This total is 638. In addition, we have searched all Manitoba deaths in 1918 and 1919 for Mennonite names, and have found another 63 deaths. Thus if our

method of identifying Mennonites is valid, we can say that in 1918 and 1919, very close to 699 Manitoba Mennonites died of all causes.

Several factors may lead to inaccuracy in our results. The first is the possibility that there were many unreported deaths in those years. Esyllt Jones gives some anecdotal evidence that some unreported deaths occurred in Winnipeg during the epidemic but any data about the extent of these “secret” deaths is not given.⁶ Linda Buhler, in her sketch of the villages of Kronsart and Neuhoffnung in the East Reserve, tells the story of how Jacob H. Martens rebuked his brother-in-law Peter S. (Schlorre) Sawatzky for burying children without funerals and without telling anyone.⁷ Doubtless there were some unreported deaths.

The extent of unreported deaths can be investigated by checking death lists from the time against the death certificates on record at Vital Statistics. Diaries from those years are also very helpful because deaths and funerals were invariably noted, even those from other church groups than that of the diarist. The best list available is that compiled by Heinrich Rempel and published first in the *Steinbach Post* (Jan 29, 1919).

The list had some omissions and errors, but the corrected list was published in *the Mennonitsche Rundschau* (Feb. 12, 1919).

It lists 64 people who died in Hanover from Sept 1st, 1918 to Jan. 17, 1919, 47 of whom were thought to have died of the flu. All 64 deaths are on record at Vital Statistics and there are only a few minor discrepancies. So we can conclude that common knowledge of deaths among Mennonites in those days is reflected by the official data. Our reading of three contemporary diaries (Isaac W. Reimer, Peter R. Dueck, Gerhard Schellenberg, all in the archives of the Evangelical Mennonite Conference in Steinbach) did not uncover deaths that were absent from the public record. The idea that some Mennonites kept deaths a secret from their neighbours is unlikely in those close-knit communities.

The other possible inaccuracy is that birth certificates in the publicly accessible database list the place of death, but not the place of residence. If a significant number of people died in a municipality other than their own, the results would be skewed. Thus, a municipality with a hospital next to other municipalities without hospitals would tend to have inflated death rates. However, the Mennonites did not have their own hospitals in 1918, and tended to be wary of those run by others.⁸ I found only six Mennonites who died in Winnipeg or St. Boniface during the flu season. Also, Hanover deaths do not include a single Francophone name even though the

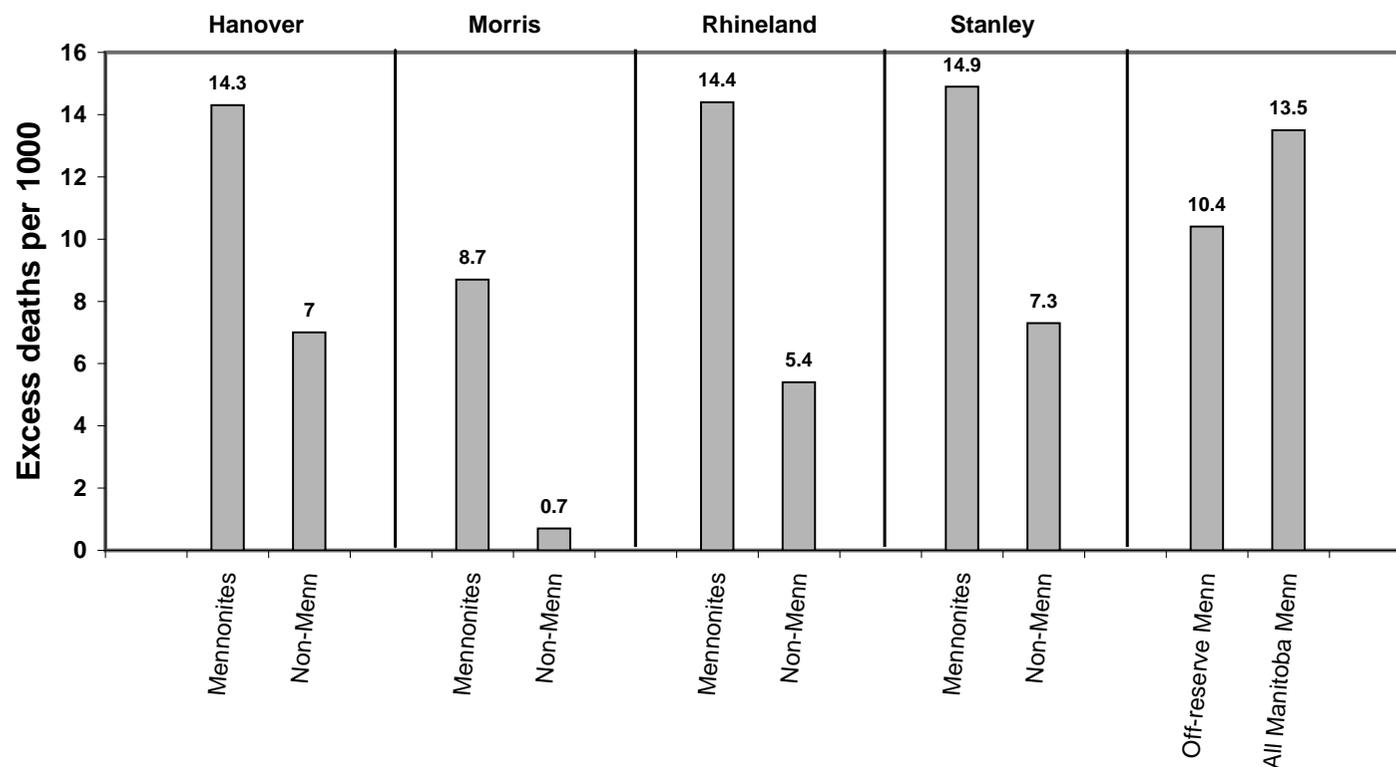


Figure 5. Mennonite and Non-Mennonite excess death rates in Hanover, Morris, Rhineland, Stanley, and in Manitoba as a whole, Nov. 1918 to Jan. 1919.

municipality is surrounded by four predominantly French-Canadian municipalities. The Ukrainian names on the Hanover list originate in Sarto, part of the municipality. Thus it is likely that most deaths occurred in the victims' own homes.

It is known that the average annual death rate in Canada in those days was about 13 per 1000.⁹ This amounts to 3.3 per 1000 for three months. If the pandemic deaths are subtracted from the list of 699 Mennonites who died of all causes in 1918 and 1919, about 450 names are left. Thus the annual death rate without a flu epidemic would have been 12.4 per 1000 per year, or 3.1 per 1000 for three months. We have chosen to use the higher number (3.3) in our calculations because it is more reliable in broad comparisons among 16 municipalities. For the Mennonites, this results in slightly lower death rates than if I had used 3.1.

The population of Hanover was about 4530 in 1918, so without the flu, about 15 deaths would have been normal. However, there were 66 reported deaths in Hanover from November 1918 to the end of January, 1919. Thus there appear to have been about 51 excess deaths due to the flu; 46 of these can be confirmed from Rempel's list but there are 5 deaths which do not appear there. If 2 or 3 of these were flu deaths, then almost all the expected deaths are accounted for.

This method can also be used to compare Mennonite and Non-Mennonite death rates. In 1918, Hanover had about 2678 Mennonites and 1852 Non-Mennonites. There were 47 Mennonite and 19 Non-Mennonite deaths. Death rates, then, are 17.6 and 10.3 per 1000 respectively. If the expected rate (3.3 per 1000) is subtracted from each, then the excess death rate due to the flu is 14.3 for Mennonites and 7.0 for Non-Mennonites. This approach to a statistical prediction of the number of flu-related deaths appears to be valid and was applied to other municipalities (Fig. 5). There is a consistent pattern of a far higher proportion of deaths among Mennonites than among their neighbours in the same municipality. The rate for all Mennonites in Manitoba is more than double the national rate (6.1).¹⁰

How do the four 'Mennonite' municipalities compare with other south-central Manitoba municipalities? The results are presented in Fig. 6. The pandemic seems to have affected all municipalities except De Salaberry, where there was only one death reported during the flu period (J.Pierre Noel, age 35). The average death rate is 4.9, not too far from the national figure, but the municipalities fall into three distinct classes: those with very high rates (Hanover, Rhineland, Stanley), those with average rates (Morris, Stuartburn, Taché, Thompson, Dufferin), and those with

very low rates (La Broquerie, Ste. Anne, Franklin, Roland, Pembina, and Grey). It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the French Canadians were almost immune to the virus while their close neighbours the Mennonites were unusually susceptible. It is possible that the very low rates in some municipalities is due to some artefact of death reporting. A quick review of non-flu deaths over 1918-19 reveals near average death rates for all of them except Ste. Anne, where the normal death rate seems abnormally low, and requires further analysis. It is not likely that flu deaths went unreported while other deaths were routinely reported.

How many Mennonites died? The number can be estimated by simply multiplying the all-Manitoba Mennonite excess death rate by the population in thousands (13.5 x 18,237 = 246). If the death rate had been equal to the Canadian average (6.1), the number of deaths would have been 112. This means that about 134 Mennonites died due to something peculiar to southern Manitoba Mennonites.

What about the Hutterites? The 1921 census reports 697 Mennonites and Hutterites in Cartier municipality, close to Portage la Prairie. Presumably most of these were the Hutterites who immigrated to Manitoba in 1918. Five Hutterites deaths were reported in Cartier in 1918-19. This is about what would be normally expected

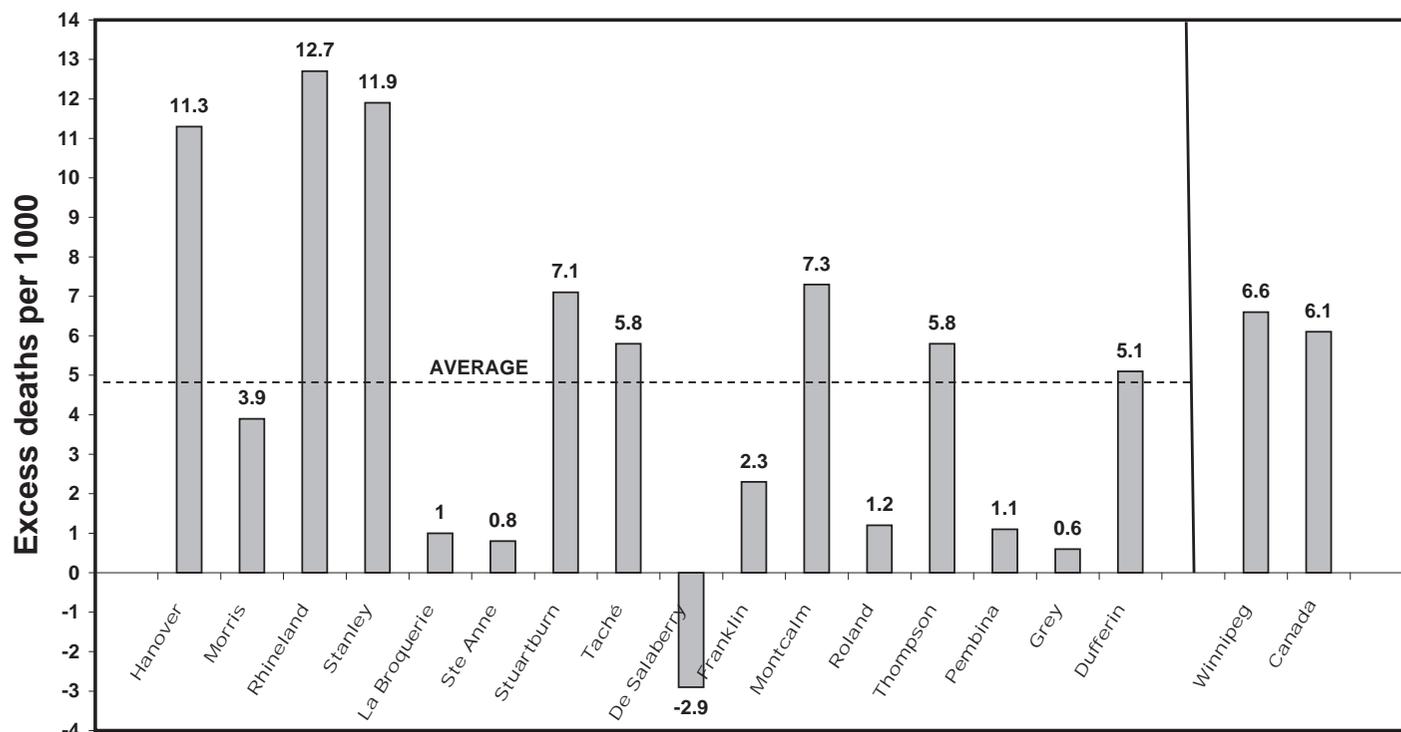


Figure 6. Excess death rates in 16 south-central Manitoba municipalities for Nov. 1918 to Jan. 1919.

for a population of about 600. Two deaths occurred during the epidemic period: Sarah Wurtz, 2 years old, and Sarah Stahl, 2 months.¹¹ This, too, was not exceptional, so we must conclude that the newly arrived Hutterites were not greatly affected by the pandemic.

Why?

Why were southern Manitoba Mennonites so much more likely to die from the effects of the flu than their neighbours? To explain this we need to find something about the Mennonites that was more-or-less absent from their neighbours. Such a difference could be genetic, geographical, historical, social, or even religious.

To establish a case for genetic factors, a much more comprehensive study than this would be required. The test would be to investigate ethnic Mennonites who have lived apart from the Mennonite milieu for most of their lives on the assumption that their genetics would not have changed. Mennonites in 1918 did not normally leave their communities so the number of off-reserve deaths is too small for statistical or genetic analysis. Genetics, however, is a reasonable speculation. The immune system is controlled by a delicate interplay between genes and hormones. It may well be that the “Mennonite” immune system, which is the culprit in H1N1 influenza deaths, is complicit in high Mennonite death rates. Add to this the close family relationships which result in a loss of genetic diversity and in the expression of recessive genes, and we may have a case for genetics.

Geographic factors can be ruled out when we look at the extremely variable death rates as we move through closely spaced municipalities. It may be that some municipalities were more isolated from the epidemic than others, but we know that the disease found its way to the most out of the way communities in Manitoba. The famous case of Norway House, where 18 percent of the population died (Yes, that’s 180 per 1000.), is a case in point.¹² One way to study geographical factors might be to do comparative studies of the Manitoba Mennonite reserves with those in Saskatchewan, namely Hague-Osler and Swift Current.

Population density and family size may also be factors. Some townships in Rhineland and Stanley, for example, were some of the most densely populated rural townships in the province and Mennonite families were large. Crowding would make flu transmission easier. However, the discordant death rates between Mennonites and non-Mennonites living side by side in the same municipality would

tend to undermine the population density explanation. As to family size, French Canadians also had large families, but they had extremely low death rates.

Historical factors have to do with previous exposure to the virus or a related virus. Those previously exposed are essentially vaccinated and somewhat immune. This may account for the relative immunity of the older generation but does not explain the relative immunity of school-age children. In 1918 Mennonites had been present in Manitoba for 44 years and during those years they were presumably exposed to the same viruses as anyone else in Manitoba. It is not likely that the antibody repertoire of young adult Mennonites differed from that of their non-Mennonite neighbours.

Did Mennonites resist public health measures such as quarantining, masking, hand-washing, covering coughs and sneezes, and general hygiene? Mennonites may well have been noncompliant in these areas, but it is hard to believe that this would have set them apart from other groups in rural Manitoba who lived the same life-style on the farm and in small villages.

What about social and religious practices? Did the common cup at communion play a part? This is unlikely because the Mennonites celebrated communion only once or twice a year, and probably not just in time for the epidemic. Also, influenza is not passed on through food or drink; it is passed on through the air. The harm would have been done in the church foyer long before the communion service.

Religion, however, could have played a different role. In those days there was a great deal of intermixing of people from different districts as the church service moved from one place to another week after week. Not only would the faithful attendee meet a different combination of people every Sunday, church was followed by yet more intermingling over dinner and fropa. Spitting of sunflower seeds in a confined living room would have been an ideal way of launching virus-laden droplets into your friends’ lungs.

October and November were also the favourite months for butchering pigs, yet another way of bringing together different combinations of people. There was probably only one degree of separation between any two Mennonites in Rhineland within one week. This kind of networking facilitates viral spread tremendously. It is very similar to the spread of AIDS in countries where concurrent multiple sexual relationships are common.

To make the case for such social factors in the Mennonite response to the 1918

flu, it would be necessary to show that other groups did not habitually do the same things. I am not sufficiently familiar with French Canadian, Anglo Saxon, or Ukrainian social and religious habits of that time to make this judgement. If you have other hypotheses, please let me know.

A footnote on the Hochfeld epidemic memorial stone

One early experience that got me (GK) interested in the 1918 epidemic was my becoming aware of an engraved stone in the Hochfeld (near Steinbach) cemetery that reads “IN MEMORY OF THE EPIDEMIC (sic) IN THE YEAR 1918-20 LAY 20 CHILDREN (sic).”¹³ [Photo: I assumed that Hochfeld had lost 20 children in the epidemic and that this was a mass grave marker. Perhaps, I thought, people had not had the energy to bury the children one by one. When I started to gather data, I realized that according to Heinrich Rempel, Hochfeld lost only one person to the flu, one year old Aganetha Harder. I realized that the stone was likely commemorating diphtheria and/or typhoid deaths. The three-year period mentioned on the stone should have alerted me to the possibility that it was not just about the influenza epidemic, which lasted only a month or two. I still do not know who put up the stone nor whether “here lay” means that it is a mass grave or merely a memorial stone for all the children who were not properly memorialized at their deaths. The stone is composed of limestone, unlike the old stones in the graveyard. Perhaps it was an afterthought erected by people eager to preserve community memories. If you have more information, please let me know.]

Lessons for Today

The first lesson is that a flu epidemic can be upon us with only a week or two of warning, if any. Vigilance is our most important safety measure. The planned response must be in place and ready at all times. The Mennonites in 1918 knew that the flu was coming, but did not take preventative measures. Once the epidemic was upon them, they cooperated with ordered school and church closures and even set up their own flu hospitals. In Steinbach, local business leaders stepped in to set up a very effective hospital in the local district school. Church leaders did not react so imaginatively.

The second lesson is that the occurrence of many deaths in a short span of time exaggerates the magnitude of the disaster and leads to overreaction, hysteria, and myth-making. There were more deaths in

the Mennonite reserves in 1908-10 due to diphtheria than in 1918 due to the flu. The difference was that the diphtheria deaths were spread out over the year, and the flu deaths occurred in one month. The above normal frequency of funerals has a psychological effect that gives a calamity greater significance. Typical comments by *Rundschau* correspondents were of this sort: "Ja, der Herr redet eine ernste Sprache in dieser Zeit zu der Menschen" (Dec. 11, 1918, Henderson, Neb.) or "Wir leben in der letzten Zeit. Möchte Jesus uns alle bereit finden, wen Er kommt." (Dec. 11, 1918, Hepburn, SK).

There are many stories about the epidemic in circulation and many of them have the status of myth. There were some multiple deaths in families, but no family was "wiped out". Not every family had a death. There were several thousand families on the Mennonite reserves but only about 250 flu-related deaths. Were people too sick or tired to bury the dead? Perhaps for a week or two during the worst of the epidemic when just about everyone was sick, but people older than 40 or so survived handily and from the diaries it appears that there was not much disruption of farming activity.

The dramatic disruption came from the closing of schools and churches. Church fellowship was interrupted and funerals were banned or very sparsely attended. Children could not attend school for a month or more. Caregivers worked around the clock and became exhausted. Agnes Fast Anderson, then a young nurse-in-training, took charge of the Steinbach flu hospital and lost only one patient to the flu. Her accomplishment has become legendary.¹⁴

Disruption in our society due to an impending or real pandemic threat would be much greater. We are much less accustomed

to the death of children and young adults than were the people of 1918. We would take much stronger measures to protect ourselves than they did. This would reduce the death rate, but it would also threaten society economically with the closure of theatres, restaurants, food stores, and with travel restrictions that would lead to job losses. On the other hand, we have much better medical care and are able to prevent secondary infections such as bacterial pneumonia with antibiotics.

Another lesson is that we must also make sure that we do not overtax our caregivers and pastors. We have written about Ältester Peter R. Dueck, who died of a heart attack at the age of 56 on Jan. 7, 1919, just after a very strenuous time ministering to the sick and dying, and to their grieving families.¹⁵

We thank the D.F. Plett Historical Research Foundation for a generous grant to GK to pursue this study..

Endnotes

1 Jones, Esyllt W., *Influenza 1918 Disease, Death, and Struggle in Winnipeg*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2007. p. 54.

2 A report from Hillsboro, Kansas dated Oct. 17 but published in the Oct. 30 issue of the *Rundschau* indicates that the epidemic was raging there, with schools and churches closed. The *Steinbach Post* carried a story about the flu in Lakeland, Kansas in its Oct. 23 issue and had advice columns about the flu in both the Oct. 16 and the 23 issues. Many deaths were reported from the military and conscientious objector camps in Kansas, including the deaths of young Mennonite men. One theory about the source of the pandemic is that it started in the military camps of Kansas. The reason it was dubbed the "Spanish" flu was simply that Spain did not suppress news of the spread of the disease as did other countries.

3 The graph shows that young adults were the primary risk group for the H1N1 influenza virus. It also suggests that young men were more susceptible than young women, in spite of the fact that many of the young women in this age group would also have been

contending with pregnancy. The huge number of very young children who died reflects some susceptibility to flu but more than half of the toll was just the normal monthly loss of infants in 1918. My research indicates that 30-40% of funerals on the Mennonite reserves in those years were for infants under the age of one. School-age children and seniors did not normally die of the flu.

4 John J. Friesen, Conrad Stoesz, personal communications.

5 I compiled a list of Mennonite names from *Reinländer (Old Colony) Gemeinde Buch 1880-1903* (John Dyck and William Harms, eds., Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 2006), *Sommerfeld Gemeinde Buch Registers of the Church at West Lynne 1881-1935* (Henry Unger, Martha Martens, and Adolf Ens, eds., Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 2004), and *History and Events* (Delbert F. Plett, D.F. Plett Farms, 1982). In rare doubtful cases I considered the location. David Peters in Haskett was considered a Mennonite, while Ida Peters in Winnipeg was not. This uncertainty is a small source of error in my study.

6 Jones, p. 58.

7 Linda Buhler, "Kronsgart and Neuhoffnung" in *Historical Sketches of the East Reserve 1874-1910*, (The Hanover Historical Society Inc., Steinbach, 1994), p. 161.

8 John J. Friesen, *Building Communities, The Changing Face of Manitoba Mennonites* (Winnipeg: CMU Press, 2007), p. 93.

9 Canadian Vital Statistics Trends, Ref. Paper No. 70, Dominion Bureau of Statistics, 1954.

10 The national rate was calculated for the whole pandemic, including October, 1918, while my data covers only Nov. 1918 to Jan. 1919. The comparison is valid, however, due to the negligible number of flu deaths among Mennonites in October. This small inaccuracy tends to lower Mennonite death rates slightly.

11 We thank Jesse Hofer for doing this search.

12 Ann Herring "There were Young People and Old People and Babies Dying Every Week": The 1918-1919 Influenza Pandemic at Norway House," *Ethnohistory* 41, (1) (1994): 73-105.

13 There is a picture of the stone in John Rempel and William Harms *Atlas of the original Mennonite villages and homesteaders of the East Reserve, Manitoba*, Altona, Manitoba, 1988. p. 10.

14 Nettie, Aganetha Neufeld, "Agnes Fast," in *Preservings* No. 10, June, 1997. p. 38.

15 Glen R. Klassen, and Kimberly Penner, Kimberly, "The Last Days of Ältester Peter R. Dueck," *Preservings* No. 27, 2007. p. 86.

The Migration to Burns Lake, BC, 1940.

By Conrad Stoesz

The drought that affected the Canadian prairies in the 1930s had severe impacts on all sectors of life. In early 1940 Saskatchewan and BC provincial governments drew up plans to remove distressed families in the Warman and Swift Current districts to central BC. Because of the severe drought, these families received relief payments from the government and it "was quite

apparent that without assistance they would be unable to re-establish themselves, and they were in danger of becoming a permanent problem."

The government chose families who had experience, pioneering qualities, adequate livestock, and machinery. The Saskatchewan government provided support and money for transportation and rations for

up to 3 years. In total 56 adults and 153 children in 28 family groups traveled about 800 miles to Burns Lake. The first train left Toppingham and arrived in Burns Lake, B.C. on May 7, 1940 with a second train arriving from Osler on June 18, 1940. The families came with various items such as ploughs, harrows, cream separators, horses, cattle, and chickens. There were also four

tractors and four blacksmith outfits that were brought along. Each family also had some cash with them—most had about \$100.

Burns Lake is in Northern BC, on the Yellowhead highway, northwest of Prince George and Vanderhoof. Upon arrival at Burns Lake the new pioneers had to travel 65 miles south to establish the communities at Oosta Lake and Cheslatta. Trucks carried them the first 30 miles until the roads became impassable. Horses and wagons made the rest of the journey. Free ferries across Francois Lake were secured, temporary housing along the way at vacant farms was arranged, and military tents were also given to the settlers for shelter.

Upon arrival families toured in small groups with BC and Saskatchewan government officials to select specific tracts of land. Timber permits were secured allowing the families to obtain trees for building shelters and fences. Each family built a log house. The average cash outlay for a family was \$15.00.

The first winter is usually one of the hardest for pioneers. The Saskatchewan government agent T.P. Devlin notes that hay land was rented, a total of 350 acres were broken, and the grain crop sown in June failed to reach maturity but was good for animal feed. In October friends in Saskatchewan sent extra feed for the winter. A good potato crop was harvested and some of the men found work off the farm and were paid in kind.

By 1942 there were 400 acres under cultivation with crops giving good yields. They had big gardens and comfortable homes and no assistance was needed. A return in 1943 again showed good progress and much optimism for the settlement.

The Cheslatta community appears to have been a Mennonite community, while there were non Mennonites in the Oosta Lake area. The new settlers appear to have enjoyed their new surroundings. J.W. Martens writing to the *Steinbach Post* from Oosta Lake in 1941 notes:

Speaking of the weather here I can say that it has already rained for several days; however now the sun is shining clearly and nicely so that is a joy to observe it. We observe how the forest, the fields, and the gardens are green and the wild fruit trees are blooming. We live in hope that this will result in many nice ripe berries which will be sought after by many people this summer and as much as possible will be canned. Even though most people are about finished with seeding there remains a lot of work for all hands.



Settlers getting ready to leave from Toppingham, Saskatchewan, May 2, 1940. Photo Credit: Mennonite Heritage Centre (MHC).



Railcars loaded with settlers effects in Toppingham, Saskatchewan, May 2, 1940. Photo Credit: MHC.



Passing Tsinket Lake by horse and wagon on May 9, 1940 on the way to their future homes at Cheslatta. Photo Credit: MHC.

The governments of BC and Saskatchewan saw this experiment as “highly satisfactory” and had the depression continued, more such settlements would have been established to relocate up to 600 additional families. This plan provided drought stricken families with a new start, cash strapped provinces with a way of decreasing relief payments, and a way for BC to increase its northern population. In 1941 another 25 families were relocated to the Vanderhoof area of BC.

By 1945 the Town of Burns Lake had four Mennonite families, Cheslatta had 56 households for a total of 190 people, and Oosta Lake had seven Mennonite families. According to the 1945 census almost all of the Mennonites were farmers who in 1940 were on about 160 acres of land.

The Mennonites who came in October 1940 established the Cheslatta Mennonite Church with Henry Bueckert as minister. The church also doubled as the school house. Outside forces began to exert pressure on the Old Colony community. The BC government insisted that the Mennonites send their children to a public school. Many of the men spent long periods of time away from their families working in sawmills. Oosta Lake was dammed to provide power for the aluminum plant. Some land belonging to the Mennonites was flooded. American speculators bought up land right around the Mennonites which was too close for comfort for the Old Colony Mennonites. With these pressures Bishop Abraham Peters lead about half of the Old Colony Mennonites to Fort St. John, B.C in 1958.

Since 1940 other Mennonite groups have moved into the area often finding work in the logging and sawmill industries. This includes Mennonites from Mexico, Sommerfeld Mennonites, and General Conference Mennonites. In 1952 a group of 15 people began gathering in homes. They used the Sommerfelder *Gesangbuch* and the *Evangeliumslieder* and spent their time singing together. In 1953 the BC Conference sent N.N. Friesen, and later Elmer Dick and Art Kropp, to help provide leadership to the group. Soon a Sunday school was operating. In 1955 a building was built in the Bye Town measuring 20 x 30 feet with no basement. Seating capacity was 50-60 people. In 1956 an addition was made measuring 16 x 40. In 1959 the group formally organized as the First Mennonite Church, Burns Lake with 33 charter members.

As of 2003 there were five private Mennonite Schools in the general area. These included the Decker Lake Mennonite



Settlers camp on the west shore of Takysie Lake on May 26, 1940. Photo Credit: MHC.



Breaking the land on lot 905, Cheslatta, the new home of J.J. Martens, August 4, 1940. Photo Credit: MHC

School in Burns Lake, Danskin Mennonite School in Burns Lake, Montney Mennonite School in Montney, Prespatou Mennonite School and the Vanderhoof Mennonite School. Churches in the area include The Island Gospel Fellowship at Burns Lake, (Evangelical Mennonite Conference), Old Colony Mennonite Church at Cecil Lake, BC, and the Old Colony Mennonite Church at Prespatou, BC, all of which have been strengthened by Mennonites from the Old Colony Mennonite church at Cheslatta. Other Mennonite groups in the area represent the General Conference/Mennonite Church Canada conference, Sommerfeld Mennonite Church, and the Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonite Church conference. According to a “Director’s Audit Report, Burns Lake District Office” published in 2000, of the 10,000 residents of the Burns Lake region, 30 percent were part of the Mennonite community.

Endnotes

- 1 T.P. Devlin, “Homesteading in Northern British Columbia”, in *Mennonite Life* December 1976, p. 21.
- 2 “Photographs and Data on Settlement in the Burns Lake District, B.C 1940”, Department of Colonization and Agriculture, Canadian National Railways, Winnipeg, MB, 1940. Mennonite Heritage Centre Archives Volume 1286, File 720.
- 3 T.P. Devlin, p.25.
- 4 T.P. Devlin, p. 25.
- 5 T.P. Devlin, p.25.
- 6 T.P. Devlin, p. 27.
- 7 This is based on the “Burns Lake and Area Genealogy Group: Area Residents and Population in 1945”. <http://www.rootsworld.com/~bcblagg/residents1945.htm>.
- 8 J.W. Martens, “Oosta Lake, B.C.”, in *Steinbach Post*, June 18, 1941, p. 8.
- 9 “Burns Lake and Area Genealogy Group: Area Residents and Population in 1945”
- 10 Helen Rose Pauls, “The Way we Were: First Mennonite Church, Burns Lake”, in *Roots and Branches, Newsletter of the Mennonite Historical Society of BC*, January 2008, p. 18.
- 11 Cornelia Lehn, *Frontier Challenge: A Story of the Conference of Mennonites in British Columbia*, Clearbrook, British Columbia : The Confer-

ence, 1990), p. 123.

12 Norman Voth, "History of First Mennonite Church Burns Lake, B.C.", paper for Canadian Mennonite Bible College, 1980, p. 2.

13 Voth, p. 3-4.

14 Lehn, p. 123-124.

15 Federation of Independent School Associations Non-FISA Schools Central & Northern B.C. http://www.fisabc.ca/non-fisa_schools/05.htm

16 Information from Mennonite Encyclopedia On Line. <http://www.mhsc.ca>

17 Directors Audit Report, Burns Lake District Of-

fice (QBC)", 2000. http://www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/audit/child_protection/burns_lake_district_2000.pdf. The Burns Lake Office covers the communities of Burns Lake, Babine Lake, Oosta Lake, Priestly Hill, Broman Lake.

Haskett – A Manitoba Border Town

By Alan Warkentin – a resident of Haskett (south of Winkler Manitoba)

The community of Haskett stands out as being a little different from the region in which it is located. First, the Irish name is not typical of the Mennonite names of the West Reserve, like Blumenfeld, Reinland and Rosengart. It was also not laid out in the typical Mennonite village lot system of the area, but rather was set up with lots like a town would have. The shape of the town site is triangular – caused by a railway line that ran from the southeast to the northwest – and the town site is about 44 acres in area size (including the area of the railroad right-of-way), and was subdivided into 303 lots, with some small lots approximately 3000 square feet in size, but many lots were double that size or larger. It was quite common for people to buy multiple lots. The location of downtown Haskett is 19 km south and 3 km west of Winkler Manitoba, only 1.5 km north from the USA border. Some interesting street names that were given in the town plan were: Grant, Dudley and Collins.¹

The Haskett "downtown" area is located at Section SW 8, Township 1, and Range 4 West. It would be located centrally in an area about 7 km east to west and 5 km south to north, and people from this area attended school at Haskett, and so the surrounding area is also called "Haskett". In 1907 Haskett was started, which is many years later than the surrounding Mennonite villages, which was around 1875. The entrepreneur Mr. Haskett who named the community was Irish, but the Irish name "Haskett" also has roots going back to Norman times, with even some Yiddish influence. An internet search brings out the various origins of the name. The definition of the name is "Strength of God" or "God Helmet" – both rather noble names.

To name the "downtown" community a "town" is probably a little presumptuous. At its peak in the 1920's to 1940's it would have had 18 homes downtown and 10 businesses. The downtown population would have been about 70. The surrounding Haskett area had another 38 homes with an added population of 200. In this article

Haskett will be referred to as a "town", not so much because of its population, but because of the businesses which were in the downtown area like the Railway and Customs Depot, general stores, lumberyards, grain elevators and blacksmith shops. An area much larger than Haskett was serviced by these businesses.

This article will cover a little "pre-Haskett" history, and a brief summary of what took place in the Haskett downtown area until the school and the last store closed in the early 1970's. For more complete information on the history of Haskett and area, see the sources listed at the end of this article. The history of the surrounding area of Haskett would warrant another article all its own.

Pre- 1907 Residents.

Before any European settlers came to the region, the First Nations people periodically lived in the Haskett area, following their traditional nomadic routes. The transition from forest and scrub to prairie occurred on the east edge of Township 1-5 W. Township 1-4 W was generally open prairie. On Section SE 12-1-5 W, there was evidence of First Nations habitation. George P. Elias—a former resident—recalls seeing large green circles where the pasture grass grew higher. This was attributed to the fact that on the outside of the circular campgrounds the animals were tethered and other organic waste was put there, so the grass grew greener there long after the settlement vanished. Other area locals also observed this. In that vicinity there still is a spring that often has water flowing all year, so it would be a perfect place to live – available water all year, the shelter of the forests with available firewood, and living right on the edge of the prairie where the bison roamed. Evidence of bison was found circa 1961 when two skeletons were unearthed while clearing land on Section NE 12-1-5 W.

Before Haskett started in 1907, there were three Mennonite villages in the region. From downtown Haskett they were as

follows: Gruenfeld – 3 km east, Kronsfield – 1.5 km northwest, and Eichenfeld – 3 km northwest. All three villages were formed and settled in the years 1875-1876. In 1881 Gruenfeld is listed as having twenty three households, Kronsfield claimed thirteen households, and Eichenfeld had twenty four households.² That makes a total of sixty households, so it is quite probable that more people lived in the region then than do now! By the time Haskett was started in 1907 the villages had shrunk in size considerably because many of the residents moved elsewhere, some moving onto their own homestead properties nearby – a move that had been discouraged earlier on. Some descendants of these villagers still live in the Haskett region today (Braun, Elias, Krahn and Warkentin).

In 1875 the region was surveyed by the Dominion Lands Office, Mr. Lachlan Kennedy being the Deputy Surveyor. This survey was being done as Mennonite settlers were just beginning to enter the area, and clearly shows the different vegetation zones, drainage and topography. The map drawn up at the time shows a Mr. Charles Grant already having a permanent residence in 1875 in the area on Section NE 12-1-5 W, and he was the first European homesteader in the Haskett region.³ In 1883 Charles Frederick Heckels of Durham England and family moved to that property. Mr. Heckels built quite a grand house for the time, but that could be understood, because when he moved to Morden he worked there as an architect, and the Dunbar Block of 8th Street and Stephen Street was known as "The Heckels Block, at the time. This same property eventually became the home of Jacob and Helena (Braun) Warkentin from Kronsfield, then Peter and Sara (Elias) Warkentin and presently Alan and Helen (Nickel) Warkentin. The original Heckels home was torn down circa 1945.

The start of Haskett – The Railway.

It was the coming of the railway that started Haskett in 1907, and it was the leaving of the railway in 1936 that played a big



Haskett on the rail line in 1925. Glencross was also a stop on the rail line between Haskett and Morden. Photo Credit: 1925 Great Northern Timetable, Pembina Thresherman's Museum.

part in the demise of the downtown businesses. The Midland Railway Company built the railway, and the company that used the line was the Great Northern Railway of the United States of America, which had general offices in New York City, St. Paul, Minnesota, and Seattle, Washington. Their lines ran through the northern states all the way from Chicago to Seattle. Branch lines ran into Canada at ten locations. The Haskett line connected Morden, Manitoba to Grafton, North Dakota. Much of the grain shipped from Haskett on the railway landed up in Duluth Minnesota—a huge grain handling terminal on Lake Superior. The Haskett train also offered passenger service every day except Sunday. One could choose to either take a short trip to Morden, or to go south as far as Grafton North Dakota. After arriving in Grafton, people could take another train to Grand Forks, and from there the possibilities of travel were many.

Just south of Haskett, was the Tipperary grain elevator also on the same railway line, but on the American side of the line between Haskett and Walhalla. Haskett and area farmers would sometimes also haul their grain there before there were grain elevators at Haskett.

On June 20, 1907 the contractors of the Morden and Walhalla branch of the Midland Railway prepared to begin the work of grading the rail bed into Walhalla North Dakota, just south east of Haskett. A week later, on June 27, 1907 Jacob Klassen of Plum Coulee Manitoba was appointed Customs Officer on the new out-port of Krahn on the Midland railway. The out-port was probably called "Krahn" because

Mr. Bernhard Krahn owned the property then, but by July 6, 1907 the corporation Mr. Haskett represented had purchased the 44 acre future town site from Mr. Krahn, and the Customs was called "Haskett" from then on. The Customs was located right beside the train track in the Haskett downtown area, but it is interesting that the Customs was located 1.5 km north of the Canada USA border, not right at the border.

By August 15, 1907 the steel was being laid down for the tracks, and advertisements were being placed in the Morden newspaper for people to buy lots in Haskett. The Manitoba Development Co. Ltd. of Walhalla North Dakota - G.W. Potter as Manager - was listed as a contact for lot sales. Mr. Haskett was listed as the President of that company.

One unfortunate accident was recorded during the construction of the railroad at Haskett. On October 24, 1907 Mr. Michel Parenteau died in a fire—allegedly trapped in a burning train car. He was a foreman of the construction crew and only forty years old, leaving a wife and two children.

It took till December 12, 1907 before the first official rail trip was taken on the railway from Morden to Walhalla. A large passenger coach capable of accommodating 125 people departed Morden at 7 pm. The trip to Walhalla took forty minutes. No formal reception took place in Walhalla, but the citizens were very welcoming to the passengers. Many Morden dignitaries were on the train, and one of them was a former resident of the Haskett region – Mr. Charles Heckels – who was now an architect residing in Morden. Neither Mr. Haskett nor

Mr. Potter of the Manitoba Development Company were on the train. The passengers disembarked at Walhalla, and shopped and visited. They began the return trip at 11:20 pm and the party reached Morden at 12:10 am.

Bernhard Krahn – Town Site Owner.

Mr. Bernhard Krahn and spouse Anna (Penner) Krahn were the second owners of the property that was to become the Haskett town site on Section SW 8-1-4W. Bernhard was formerly from the village of Kronsfield nearby where he had homesteaded. On August 3, 1891 the deed to the property was registered to Bernhard Krahn, who had purchased the property from the Hudson's Bay Company—the first owners. At one point the Hudson's Bay was allotted the Section 8 of each township. On July 6th, 1907 Bernhard Krahn sold a portion of the land to the Manitoba Development Company of Walhalla North Dakota, USA (a town a few miles south of Haskett). About 44 acres were sold, leaving Mr. Krahn with about 116 acres. The President of the purchasing company was C.J. Haskett, or the middle initial could be a "T". The Manitoba Development Corporation also had purchased two plots of land beside other sections of the Great Northern Railroad in southern Manitoba - namely at Bergman and at Kronsgart - but the former Bernhard Krahn property seemed to be a brighter prospect as a future town, hence Mr. Haskett gave it his name.

During World War I (1914 – 1918), the Royal North West Mounted Police were billeted at the Bernhard and Anna Krahn home, and their purpose was to be a border patrol. Bernhard's grandson Frank P. and Mary (Goertzen) Klassen purchased the property from the estate of Bernhard Krahn in 1942, and after 1979 Bernhard's great-grandson George and Anne (Elias) Klassen have resided on the property.⁴

Mr. Haskett.

The Mr. Haskett, who left the town his name, still remains a bit of a mystery. He bought the land, created subdivisions, sold lots, left with money in his pocket and an Irish name that has stayed.

In the original Haskett history book (1952) Peter Dyck writes of a Mr. "John" Haskett residing in Winnipeg in 1952, who claimed to be the founder. The 1907 document of the Haskett town site has the name with initials C. "J." Haskett, or C. "T" Haskett (not clearly legible). If the initial indeed is "J", one then assumes that his second name could be "John", the man Peter Dyck met. Municipal records of 1907



Royal North West Mounted Police Constable Border Patrol and Bernhard Krahn circa 1916. Photo Credit: George Klassen

and onwards show that taxes were paid by a Mr. Haskett of Fredericksburg, Iowa, and that man was Christopher T. Haskett, a brother to Charles John.

The History of Fredericksburg & Vicinity – 1908 by W.S. Pitts”, gives details of the family of a Mr. James G. Haskett. In 1817 Mr. James G. Haskett immigrated to Canada from Ireland, but in 1857 the family moved to Iowa, USA. Of the nine children that James Haskett had, two sons, Christopher T. and Charles J. deserve special interest.

Much is written of Christopher T. as being quite the entrepreneur in Fredericksburg, Iowa. An article states that he was in the dry goods business and went into the creamery business and succeeded there. He sold that and went into the cattle and grain business. He was also involved in the real estate business, so if he followed that market he would have been aware of the plans of the Great Northern Railroad to run lines into Canada. It is interesting to note, that in 1907, the history of Fredericksburg states that Charles J. Haskett lived in Centralia, Kansas, but the taxes were paid by a Mr. Haskett in Iowa. In old documents, it is very hard sometimes to distinguish between the initial “J” or “T”. Was the Christopher T. in Iowa also part of this enterprise? The taxes for many years were being paid by someone with the name of either “CJ” or “CT”, and the bills were sent to Iowa, not Kansas, where Charles J. lived in 1908. In 1929 Charles J. is still listed as living in Centralia Kansas. So it seems Christopher T. of Iowa was paying the taxes, so either he was a really nice brother, or he was part of the enterprise. Mr. Peter Dyck met a Mr. John Haskett in Winnipeg in 1952,

so somewhere in between 1929 and 1952 Charles John moved to Winnipeg. This is all quite likely, because his father had originally immigrated to Canada in 1817, so there might have been family connections in the Winnipeg area.

Christopher T. never had any children, but Charles J. probably did, so it would have been Charles J.’s descendants that Haskett locals would bump into occasionally, and they would claim to be the descendants of the Mr. Haskett who named the town.

Either way, be it Christopher T. or Charles J. or likely both; these entrepreneurs left their mark here in southern Manitoba. Neither of them is ever recorded as having actually lived in Haskett for any period of time.

Customs and Railway Depot.

The first Haskett Customs and Railway Depot was built in 1908, and was located opposite Main Avenue, just east of the new Great Northern Railway tracks, basically in the middle of SW 8-1-4 W. Locals claim that the original building burned down and was replaced in the same location. One long building served as both Customs and Railway Station. The Customs residence was at one end and the Great Northern Railway Agent lived at the other end. The Customs residence consisted of two bedrooms, a kitchen and living room. In the middle was where the business of Customs and Railway was conducted. The estimated size of the whole building was twenty six feet wide and one hundred and twenty feet long, making the total area 3120 square feet. If the areas were of equal size, each area would have been a little over 1000 square feet.

Train service continued into the 1930’s, but the business on the train decreased instead of increased. There was a marked increase in business in the early 1920’s,

when many Mennonites departed to Mexico via the Haskett train station. The “dirty thirties” definitely played a part in the decrease of the rail business, with much less grain being shipped to the elevators. The business for the train was so slow that it was even known to stop any place and at any time for a lone passenger or a can of cream going to the Morden Creamery. Trains can not run that way and remain efficient, but they were desperate for any business they could get. In 1936 the train stopped running altogether. Haskett locals tried some schemes to keep the train running, and Haskett entrepreneur William M. Elias and teacher John K. Friesen were instrumental in that effort.

Reviving the railroad was to no avail, and by 1939 the tracks were torn up. Some local businesses thrived for a while, but in one way or another closing of the railroad played a huge part in the demise of downtown businesses.

The Railway Agents were Americans, and some of the agents over the years were: J.T. Evans, W.L. Weden, H.L. Quiring, O.C. Barta, M. Anderson, and Mr. Osman. In 1936 when the railway closed, a new Customs building was built at the USA Canada border, and there was no longer a need for a Railway Depot. The building in downtown Haskett was moved to Morden, where it became a building used for Krushel Standard Gas and Engine Works until a fire destroyed it.

The new Customs building had a residence attached to it where the Officer In Charge and his family could stay. There was also a cabin on the grounds for the relief officer, but the cabin was quite small and only suitable for a single person, not a family. The Customs Officers that lived at the Customs generally felt themselves to be part of the Haskett community. In 1969 the Customs Office was replaced again, and



Train and station circa 1920’s. Photo Credit: Henry Ens

no longer offered accommodation. This is the building that is there presently in 2008.

The customs officers over the years were:

Jacob A. Klassen (1908 – 1912)
Alexander Cruickshank (1912 – 1925)
Frederick Clayton Coulter (1925 – 1931)
Hugh Taylor Borthwick (1931 – 1944)
William James Reilly (1944 – 1947)
John Matthew Nelson (1947 – 1955)
Al Hildebrand (1954 – 1962)
Peter Loewen (1955 – 1956)
John Dubois (1956 – 1976)
Henry W. Elias (1962 – 1963)
Henry Klassen (1963 – 1972)

Customs Officer Hugh Borthwick was quite a humorous fellow, but he could be stern when the occasion arose. He was a veteran of WW II, and had been on the front lines there. Through the friendship he had made with a fellow service man, the Hollywood actor Clark Gable came through Haskett in 1938, in the company of Hugh's old army friend. The actor stayed briefly and no record has survived of his impression of Haskett.

A Haskett local, Mr. Henry W. Elias served as a Customs Officer from 1962 to 1963. One can imagine he might have had some challenges dealing with his own friends and neighbours at the border.

John Dubois and Henry Klassen were the last Officers at the Customs before the new one was built which had no residence. Henry did not live at the residence, but John and his wife Marj and daughter Dianne did. Marj was a war bride from England that John had met there while on duty with the R.A.F during WW II. Marj retained her British accent and humour, which added colour to the Haskett environment.

One humorous incident of the Haskett Customs shows just how times have changed. What happened in this incident would never happen now. The names used in this story will be changed to protect the guilty and innocent. "Isbrand" and his buddies from Haskett went to Walhalla and "celebrated" a little there, and decided to bring some liquor home with them. The Canadian Customs Officer "Maxwell" greeted them on their return and asked what items they had to declare. "Isbrand" and his buddies willingly told him. "Maxwell's" eyes lit up and asked them if they wouldn't mind stepping into his office and sharing a little of their good cheer, which they did. One of the lookouts posted, notified "Maxwell" that there were people on foot about to come to the Customs Office to report. "Maxwell" then realized that he

was unable to stand and perform his duties. "Maxwell" requested that "Isbrand" put on the Customs Officer hat, pull it low over his eyes, and wave the people on from a distance to proceed on through without stopping. The ruse worked, and "Isbrand" still chuckles over the time that he impersonated a Customs Officer.

Kronsfeld/Haskett School District #1284.

The first schools in the Haskett region were German speaking private schools at Eichenfeld and Gruenfeld. The first English speaking school was established near Kronsfeld in 1905. It was to serve the region of the villages of Kronsfeld, Eichenfeld and Gruenfeld, but only twelve students were enrolled in 1906. Feelings against having an English school were so strong, that the school was not allowed on village property, but instead Jacob Warkentin of Section NE 12-1-5 W agreed to have it on his property. From all the surrounding villages, only three families approved of having their children attend an English school. In 1907 the town of Haskett had been established, and by 1909 the one room school was moved to the Haskett location, and by 1910 it had forty four students enrolled, with Oscar Meckling (an Austrian immigrant) as the teacher at the time, followed by Helen Warkentin. The English speaking school was becoming more accepted.

In 1923 the school proved to be too small, and was replaced with a two room school and it had two teachers on staff after that. This school was in use until 1971, and after that elementary school students were bussed to the nearby village of Reinland. In 1999 the school was torn down. In a span of 67 years from 1905 – 1971 Haskett had a total of at least 65 teachers, but since 1923 there were two teachers, one for the lower grades, normally 1-4, and the other teacher from Grade 5-11 at times, though by 1957 the highest grade taught was 8. The highest enrolment years were in the 1950's when the enrolment nearly reached 60 students.

One quirk about the Haskett School is that it was called the "Kronsfeld" School until 1944. This was because the first English school was started in the Kronsfeld Village area in 1905 before Haskett came into existence in 1907. One supposes that the paper work to change the name was deemed too burdensome to those in a position to do so, and they stalled till it finally just needed to be done. There is a local "legend" that gives another possibility. In 1905 Mr. Jacob Warkentin agreed to have the English School on his property against strong opposition to an English school in the area. When the school was moved to

the Haskett site in 1909, Jacob Warkentin is claimed to have agreed to it on one stipulation—that the school's name remain "Kronsfeld". The name was changed in 1944, and Jacob Warkentin died in 1945. We'll leave the "legend" as such.

Haskett had many good teachers, and even some "characters." Two Haskett teachers received national and even international fame some time after their tenure at Haskett. Frederick P. Grove taught at Haskett briefly in 1912 to 1913, completing the latter part of a term of a teacher who left. He was originally from Germany, and was an author who had published a few novels before his time in Haskett, and he published more after leaving Haskett. After his passing, it was determined that he had "reinvented" himself at the time of his arrival in Haskett (the school was still called "Kronsfeld" then) and that added more to the celebrity status of the man.

John K. Friesen formerly from Altona taught in Haskett from 1930 to 1935. In 1997 he received the Order of Canada for his lifelong work in the field of education. At one point his pursuit of promoting education led him to be involved with UNESCO and other organizations, which led him to spend time in various countries like India, Iran, Egypt, and Kenya. But the students and people from Haskett remembered him not for his fame, but for being a kind and considerate man who related with dignity to people of all walks of life.

As was typical of the country schools of the day, the annual Christmas program and the school picnic were big events where the whole community attended.

The Haskett School was more than a place to get an education. Haskett had no church, so residents would attend churches in the area, but for years beginning in the 1930's Sunday School was held in the Haskett School. Evening programs were held, sometimes educational and for entertainment, and at other times with a spiritual emphasis with Gospel programs called "Jugendvereins" that generally had younger people singing and performing, but the program was for people of all ages. In 1964 the Bethel Bergthaler Church was built in the area, so after that the Sunday School ceased to exist at Haskett School.

Stores

The major businesses that developed in Haskett were: General Stores, Lumberyards, Farm Equipment Dealerships and Blacksmiths. At times two or more similar business would co-exist, but eventually one would close while the other grew. When the railway came, businesses boomed in

Haskett. Mr. William M. Elias and Anna (Thiessen) Elias owned many of the lots of Haskett in the early days. Starting in 1913 and in the years thereafter, Mr. Elias had the first General Store, Lumberyard, and Farm Equipment Dealership. His son-in-law David A. Fehr and Anne (Elias) Fehr continued some of those enterprises. They continued with the International Harvester dealership and also had a General Store. By 1946 they closed their last business in Haskett, and continued doing business in Morden, which was a larger town. Mr. Elias's son Peter R. Elias and Jessie (Rempel) Elias also ran a store in Haskett from 1946 to 1949. This store passed on to the George and Mary (Elias) Rempel family, and it even grew into having a café for a few years till it closed in 1952. It seated nine and had the best banana splits in town!

Brothers Cornelius I. and John Dyck also had various businesses from 1919 to 1929, which included a General Store, a Variety Store, and a McCormick Deering Farm dealership. Cornelius passed away in 1929, and his brother John continued in business in Haskett until 1935.

Sam and Goldie (Nitikman) Ashkin took over a General Store from William M. Elias in 1921. They were of Jewish ancestry, and adapted well to the Mennonite community. This store was called "N&S Merchants" and continued till fire destroyed the store in 1935.

The Haskett General Store went by many names and owners over the years. Elias, Sawatzky and Letkeman were some of the owners over the years starting in 1908. From 1937-1958 the store was operated by the Janzen family, starting with Peter J. and Margaret (Enns) Janzen and, and then continuing with Jake and Margaret (Suderman) Janzen. Peter J. Janzen first worked at the Sam Ashkin store till it burned down, then he purchased the Haskett General Store which was for sale at the



Haskett Main Street circa 1930's. Note the train in the distance. Photo Credit: Jake Janzen

time. These were some of the "glory years" that older residents talk about. The store was a real meeting place for the residents of Haskett and people from the surrounding area. The store was also a post office which was at the rear of the store, which added to the traffic coming there. Gasoline was sold there, and cars were becoming common, and "going uptown" was becoming in vogue so the locals gathered there frequently.

The Cornelius C. and Maria (Elias) Reimer family had the General Store and post office next from 1958 to 1967, with John and Susan (Harder) Reimer spending most of the time there, but George Reimer also worked there. From 1967 till closing in 1970 Isaac and Katherina Friesen owned the store and post office. The post office changed to rural delivery in 1970, so the locals had less of a reason to frequent the store. The two room school closed in 1971, and altogether the community was becoming more mobile and shopping at larger centres like Walhalla, Winkler and Morden. The store eventually became a residence for the William and Margaret Siemens family, and in 1975 it became the home of John and Dora Eberhardt, and it is still Dora's home

to the day of this writing in August 2008.

Lumberyards and Blacksmiths.

As mentioned previously, William M. Elias had a lumberyard for a while, and his competition was another lumberyard owned by Frank J. Letkeman (1927-1930), and later David D. Fehr (1931-1939). From 1939-1952 Henry I. Fehr had the lumberyard till it closed.

Many people had small blacksmith or tinsmith shops, but two that continued for a number of years were John Nelson from 1917 to 1933, and Isaac D. Fehr from 1929 to the 1950's.

Grain Elevators.

With the coming of the railroad, two grain elevators sprang up on the railway line east of downtown Haskett. In 1910 the McCabe elevator was built, with its parent company in Duluth Minnesota. It was in operation from 1910 to 1936.

The other grain elevator was known as the International elevator, and from 1920 to 1936 it was known as the A.H. Lee & Sons grain elevator. Mr. Andrew H. Lee of Walhalla also owned a grain elevator a few miles south of Haskett on the same rail line, at a siding called "Tipperary". Mr. Lee's son Clarence managed the Haskett site, while Howard was at the Walhalla site. The family resided in Walhalla, but with the closing of the elevator, much of the family left, some moving to California.⁵ The former Lee elevator sat empty for three years until 1939 when Mr. Jacob P. Riediger purchased it and renamed the elevator "Jacob P. Riediger & Sons." Mr. Riediger had another grain business in Morden, so the grain collected in Haskett was shipped to Morden via truck, because there was no train after 1936. The McCabe elevator was still standing abandoned, so Mr. Riediger purchased it and in 1939 he tore it down and used the lumber to build



Haskett Main Street. International Harvester dealership and the Red & White store circa early 1940's. Photo Credit: Jake Janzen



McCabe grain elevator circa 1930's. Photo Credit: Jake Janzen

an annex to the former Lee elevator which he now owned. The J.P. Riediger & Sons business in Haskett continued until 1955, and after it closed the elevator was torn down shortly after. Pete Enns – a son in law to Mr. Riediger- was one of the managers of the elevator, and later Jacob I. Warkentin was the manager till it closed.

Actually, there still is a grain elevator standing in the Haskett area, but it is no longer used as a business. It is about 3 km northwest of downtown Haskett. To the locals and others familiar with this region, this elevator is known as “The Barley King Elevator”, and it is a well known landmark to many. It was built between 1947 and 1950 and was a seed cleaning plant for the Elias Seed Farm. It was not a depot where farmers delivered grain to sell, but it was a seed cleaning plant where grain was cleaned of weed seeds for seeding. This was a family farm with both family members and hired help working on it. In 1947 and 1950 George G. Elias – the eldest son and farm manager was awarded a prize on behalf of the farm for the best sample of barley at the Brandon Winter

Fair. During the awards ceremony a crown was presented and worn—hence the name “Barley King”.

Another huge building is in the Haskett area, about 3 km east of downtown. It is not a typical grain elevator, but in the 1950's a large cement building was built there. The purpose of it was to clean sunflower seeds. Cornelius C. Reimer was the starter of this enterprise and together with his family's help the business grew into many other grain related enterprises and a livestock feed business. The buildings have changed and have been added over the years, and now it is a large livestock feed and supply business known as “Fehrway Feeds”, with Dave and Nancy Fehr as proprietors. The building is so tall it is used to mount a tower to provide high speed internet service to the locals.

Reunions.

Two large celebrations have been held in Haskett to celebrate its history. On Sunday July 9, 1978 a large tent was set up on the school grounds, and an all afternoon program was presented. Sarah (Fehr) Thiesen was the chairperson of the committee that it took to make the day a success. On June 30th and July 1st, 2007, two large tents were set up and a two day event was held. Hundreds of people attended. The timing of the event almost coincided with being a hundred years after Haskett was started July 9, 1907. Peter Klassen and Abe Wieler were co-chairs of the executive committee and other committees were formed to make the event a success. It is interesting to note that Peter Klassen is the great-grandson of Bernard Krahn, the owner of the Haskett town site who sold the property to Mr. Haskett in 1907. It is interesting to note that Peter Klassen is the great-grandson of Bernard Krahn --the owner of the Haskett town site who sold it to Mr. Haskett in 1907.

Summary.

This article only briefly touches on the forming of Haskett and of commercial and school activity in the downtown area. Much could be said in another article about what happened in the surrounding Haskett area. The downtown school and commercial section of Haskett is gone, but there are still some homes in the downtown area, and some nice ones at that. The old sense of community in Haskett has changed, because there is no central place to meet like a school or a general store, but Haskett is still a thriving community, just with different dynamics. The farms in the Haskett area are very diverse from various livestock operations to potatoes and grain and various special crops. Commerce is also thriving, with businesses like Pilgrims Builders, Triangle Truck and Tractor Service, Borderview Enterprises and Fehr-Way Feeds being some of the larger enterprises.

On December 1st, 1940 Henry Fehr put this entry in his sister Sarah's (1978 reunion chair) autograph book: “I'm tough, I'm rough. I'm from Haskett, that's enough!” What more needs to be said?

Further Reading and Information:

Peter Dyck, A History of Haskett, 1952.
Peter Dyck and Peter Letkeman, Haskett Centennial History, 2007.
Alan Warkentin, “Haskett History Picture CD & Brief Early History pamphlet,” 2007

Endnotes

- 1 Haskett town plan, 1907. Morden Land Titles Office.
- 2 John Dyck and William Harms, eds. *1880 Village Census of the Mennonite West Reserve.* (Winnipeg: Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 1998).
- 3 Dominion Lands Office Township maps 1-4 and 1-5 published 1887 available at Canada Map Sales, Winnipeg.
- 4 George Klassen, Haskett.
- 5 *The Walhalla Mountaineer*, Walhalla Library.

Recognizing Contributions as Validation of Women:

The Remarkable Adaptability of Rosengard's Russlaender Women

By Maria Falk Lodge

This article focuses on the *adaptability* that the Russlaender women of Rosengard, Manitoba demonstrated chiefly during the 1930s and 1940s, in the face of what sometimes amounted to almost insurmountable challenges. Restricted though they were by virtue of their gender and the limitations that this placed on them, these women were nevertheless agents for

change by the very nature of the impact they had on their families. Such agency also gave to them personally the capacity to meet their own needs, and to remain unwavering in their commitment to their families and to their new homeland.

When Russlaender Mennonites settled in the community of Rosengard during the 1920s and '30s, they had already

experienced losses of enormous proportions, including the loss of their homeland.¹ As refugees they would suffer further injury, both economic and emotional, in their newly adopted home. Some, if not all, of these additional losses would be compounded by those already experienced previously. Marlene Epp aptly describes Mennonite refugee women as developing

strategies for survival and accomplishment.² My research confirms that the women in my study were remarkable in their capacity for doing just that.

In order to explore how it was that the women in question were able to adapt, I prepared a series of questions relating to the home life of individuals who grew up in Russlaender homes in Rosengard during the 1930s and the 1940s, and to some degree also the 1950s. With one exception, I provided these questions in advance to a total of thirteen members of five different families who had been children and young adults at the time, in an effort to elicit their recollections and impressions with respect to how their mothers coped with life as they found it and what sorts of adaptations they had to make. In some instances I received written responses from the participants, and in others cases I interviewed them either in person or by telephone. It is also important to note that these individuals ranged from 60 to 85 years of age, so that the responses reflect varying time periods in Canadian history and also different eras in the development of some of the families.

The notes of my research are in my possession. In making reference to the information provided by the participants, I have used pseudonyms, in order to provide confidentiality for them. Since I personally lived in a Russlaender home during my childhood and youth, my own experiences in that context are also reflected in this paper.

The community of Rosengard during the time period covered by my paper was a public school district administered by the Manitoba Department of Education. It was located approximately 15 kilometres southwest of Steinbach, in Manitoba. All of the families in this community were of Mennonite origin, but fewer than half of these were *Russlaender*, the designation given to those families who emigrated from Ukraine in Russia during the 1920s and 1930s. This paper focuses specifically on Russlaender women because of the unique circumstances in which they found themselves as new Canadians at or near the beginning of the worldwide Depression. They had experienced horrendous trauma prior to coming to Canada, and also in some cases, while travelling to their new destination.³ This placed them in a class by themselves as compared to the other women in the community. Furthermore, in addition to all the hardships they had already experienced these immigrants were now residents of a new country where their established way of life would be radically changed from that

to which they were accustomed. Although their traditional way of life had already been severely challenged in the land of their birth, they had nevertheless remained in their own villages, and had to some degree retained their institutions. While they were accustomed to being a minority in a very large country, it was however an imbalance with which they were familiar, and to which they knew how to relate. They also had a working knowledge of Russian even though it was not their own language. The dominant language in their newly adopted homeland was completely foreign to their ears. Indeed, I personally remember hearing my parents speaking Russian when they did not want their children to understand what they were saying. That too was an exercise in adaptability as it was virtually impossible, given the very crowded conditions under which we lived, for adults to discuss matters privately. The customs and bureaucratic requirements of Canada were strange to the women in my research,⁴ and the climate was not nearly as benign as the one they had left behind. In most instances their new neighbours were not relatives or long-standing family friends and acquaintances.⁵ When they arrived in the community, the nearby cemetery did not represent the final resting place of their loved ones. It served only to remind them of such resting places in their former homeland to which they knew they would never return, to pay their respects and shed their silent tears.⁶ The changes to which they had to conform and adjust in order to keep going were immense.

In the face of these difficult circumstances the Russlaender women of Rosengard exhibited tremendous courage, strength and resourcefulness. The capacity for adaptability as demonstrated in the contributions these particular women made to their families and their community has not become part of the collective consciousness of Mennonites.⁷ This lack of recognition is regrettable both because it fails to give appropriate credit to the women who made these tremendous contributions, but perhaps even more importantly, such stories will be lost to future generations if they remain untold. When that happens, we are in danger of viewing these women as belonging to another time and place that has no relevance for us, rather than recognising them for the foundation they laid for their collective descendents. Indeed, the stories of these Rosengard women are all but lost now, given that they are no longer alive to remind us of the things we did not think to ask when they were with us. In many instances their children are already in their

mid-eighties, and some are no longer alive. More importantly, if we fail to record the stories of these women and their remarkable capacity for adapting to life as they found it, their descendents cannot learn from the examples they set as they made the best of the circumstances under which they lived. As Pamela E. Klassen so poignantly states in the context of interviewing and recording the experiences of two Mennonite refugee women, "these women, grey-haired and gracious, have not always been who they are now."⁸ By taking time to consider how the Russlaender women of Rosengard adapted and succeeded in the face of great adversity, we can learn how significant their capacity for adjustment truly was. Perhaps we too can take apart some of the *silences* to which Klassen so powerfully refers and piece together the stories of the women in my study.

In order to survive under the new rules and circumstances within which they found themselves, the women who are the subject of my research had to learn to adapt in almost every facet of their lives. In his book *Future Shock* Alvin Toffler makes reference to "the shattering stress and disorientation that we induce in individuals by subjecting them to too much change in too short a time."⁹ He takes the position that not only must we define change by its content but that such a definition must also focus on the pace at which such change occurs.¹⁰ He points out that individuals can adapt to change more effectively if they have some sense of what lies ahead.¹¹ It can be said with certainty that the Russlaender women of Rosengard had already experienced such "shattering stress and disorientation" long before the decision to come to Canada was made. These stresses would continue to pursue them as they made the necessary adjustments that were required of them in the decisions that they and their families made. However, given the catastrophic events of the worldwide Depression of the 1930s, it was impossible for them to have foreseen how difficult it would be to function within their new environment. In addition, the growing escalation of atrocities under the Stalinist regime of the 1930s only served to heighten their *angst* for the well-being of loved ones left behind.¹²

The stories of the lives of the Russlaender women can be compared to the quilt-making so effectively described by Gail Cuthbert Brandt when she comments on the development of the writing of women's history in Canada. In time this quilt, made up of colourful blocks which were contributed by numerous individuals, somewhat resembled a 'crazy quilt.'¹³

Nevertheless, in Cuthbert Brandt's view, "[w]hat has been lost in the simplicity and convenience of generalization, however, has been more than compensated for by the variety and richness of detail embodied in the evolving work."¹⁴

In reviewing various studies concerning the division of labour, Cuthbert Brandt observes that "[a]ll of these studies provide fresh insights into the way in which concepts and specific definitions of skill have been socially constructed, most frequently to the detriment of women workers."¹⁵ That these social constructs also applied to the women in my study is strongly supported by my research. Given that the farms owned by these families were not large, the tasks that the men performed were relatively small in number by comparison to the enormous responsibilities assumed by the women, particularly since all of the families had from six to eight children and more.¹⁶

In an article on *Gender History and Historical Practice*, Joy Parr expresses the view that basic assumptions of gender history, being that masculinity and femininity do not exist in isolation from each other, and are not 'cultural universals.'¹⁷ The women in my study routinely undertook sewing and mending for their large families, as well as the preparation and preserving of food even though there was no compelling reason why more of these tasks could not have been undertaken by the men. The fact that men are tailors, bakers, and chefs by trade, supports the concept that these tasks need not necessarily be done by women; in essence; these tasks are culturally constructed as were many of the responsibilities that the women of Rosengard carried.

In order to appreciate and highlight the enormous degree of adaptability that the women in my study exhibited, it is necessary to explore the "Underside" of Canadian Mennonite history so aptly stated by Marlene Epp.¹⁸ While much has changed with regard to the approach to historical research and writing since Epp wrote her paper, it nevertheless is of significant consequence for Mennonites that the "wealth of wisdom and talent, vision and courage, humour and pain"¹⁹ of Mennonite women be uncovered, in order that we will better understand our own history, including particularly the place that women have had in it.

Historical Background of Rosengard Mennonites

Mennonites are an ethno-religious group with origins during the sixteenth century in various parts of Europe including the Netherlands. One large segment

of Mennonites having originated in the Netherlands settled in Ukraine via Prussia beginning in the late 1700s pursuant to an invitation from Catherine the Great of Russia. It was in this historical context in which the origins of the people of Rosengard were situated. During the period in question, a large number of Rosengard residents were descendents of Mennonites who had immigrated to Canada during what might be called the "First Wave" in the 1870s. The Russlaender, on the other hand, were more recent émigrés having arrived in Canada mainly during the 1920s, following the Russian Revolution and its aftermath. These later arrivals are generally referred to as the "Second Wave." It is important to note that the Russlaender had cultural adjustments to make also within the Mennonite community of Rosengard, given that their fellow Mennonites had not experienced life in Russia during the previous fifty years. Most significantly, these earlier arrivals had experienced Canada in a much different time period from that of the second quarter of the twentieth century, and the Russlaender similarly could not possibly imagine the hardships they had endured and the influences that had shaped their development. By the same token, the descendents of those who had arrived in Canada during the 1870s had no personal experience of knowing what it was like to have gone through the Russian Revolution with its horrors, and its effect of radically and irrevocably altering the lives of Mennonites and Mennonite village life in what had now become the Soviet Union. Essentially these two groups of Mennonites had become what were in essence two subcultures with a common historical heritage. Perhaps not surprisingly their faith traditions had also evolved differently, given a half century of separation. It was in this context that Russlaender tried to become new Canadians in the Mennonite community of Rosengard. It was also in this environment that the Russlaender women tried to adapt to life as they found it.

In writing about the world of Mennonite farm women of another era, Royden K. Loewen observes that "[s]ometimes this portrait [of Mennonites] overshadows the fact that each community was made up of real men and women who organized their lives in single-family households ..."²⁰ A study of issues relating to health among Low German speaking Mennonite women from four main religious affiliations in Southern Alberta found considerable variations among such single family households and concluded that "the interpretation of behaviours in this culture cannot simply

be based upon religious affiliation but is also dependent upon individual choices that have been made, and other individual variations."²¹ This description no doubt also applies to the Russlaender families in my study. It was within the context of these single-family households that the women made ongoing adaptations to life as they found it, and in so doing made immeasurable contributions that would shape their own lives, and the lives of their families for generations to come.

Challenges Facing Russlaender Women in Rosengard

That adaptation to life in Canada was a challenge for Russlaender women is an understatement. If, as Royden Loewen has stated "[i]t was her role as a mother that often confined the woman to a private world,"²² the women who are the subject of my research were even more so confined. They were newcomers, and given the economic challenges and restrictions, in particular during the 1930s, there were few options for any thoughts beyond that of sheer survival. Certainly any movement beyond the surrounding Mennonite communities was almost impossible, both because of the limitations of language but also because means of transportation were essentially limited to horse-drawn conveyances.

While it is a reality that the women in question were limited to the private sphere, their influence within their environment was enormous. The individuals who were consulted for the purpose of this paper regarding the home life in which they grew up stated without equivocation, that their mothers prepared the meals in their families.²³ According to Marlene Epp, ethnic culinary traditions are conveyed primarily through women.²⁴ That this was so for the women in my study may not therefore be so remarkable. What is of great significance however is the capacity that they showed for adapting to the circumstances in which they found themselves. All of them had gone through exceptionally difficult conditions during the past decade and more of their lives. In some instances the personal losses they had suffered would mark them for the rest of their earthly journey. The brother to one of the mothers in this study was murdered during the era of the Russian Revolution, when she was a young woman. I was told by her son that she recorded this devastating occurrence and her emotional trauma in a diary. He is convinced that this traumatic experience affected his mother for the rest of her life.²⁵ In other instances some of the women came to Canada with

only their spouse and their children, and no members of their own extended families, such as mothers or sisters, on whom they could rely for practical or emotional support. Another family lost two children while in a refugee camp enroute to Canada.²⁶

Refugee Status of Russlaender Women

Although the Russlaender women were not World War II refugees as were those who were interviewed by Marlene Epp in her paper “The Semiotics of Zwieback: Feast and Famine in the Narratives of Mennonite Refugee Women,” they were nevertheless not willing immigrants who had voluntarily left the land of their birth. They were therefore “refugees” according to Epp’s definition, which includes being an individual who has fled her country because of fears of persecution or because political and social disruptions have become intolerable.²⁷ Future betterment in another country was furthest from the minds of most Mennonites living in Ukraine at the beginning of World War I. It was only after the Russian Revolution that these Mennonites began to fear that their way of life was truly coming to an end, and indeed that their very lives were in danger. The women in my study were decidedly in this category.

Epp further observes that “[l]ittle attention has been paid to the meaning of immigration for women who were dislocated unwillingly from their homes and for whom migration represented an escape from tragedy and despair more than hope for future betterment.”²⁸ That the women in my research were able to adapt so well to their new homeland is nothing short of extraordinary.²⁹

The Stories that Shape Us

In writing about her conversations with two Mennonite refugee women, Pamela E. Klassen emphasizes that her book *Going by the Moon and the Stars* is “an enquiry into memory – an intimate reflection on what Agatha and Katja remember about their lives, and *how these memories continue to shape them* (my emphasis).”³⁰ Klassen then goes on to state “[t]he stories we listen to and the stories we tell profoundly shape the stories we live.”³¹ That also applies to the families of the Russlaender women in my paper.

Klassen further explores the lives of the women she interviewed, asserting that their domestic worlds, which is where they daily live out and adapt their religion, must also be entered into in order to understand their religious lives. It is here “[i]n their homes, [that] their food is blessed by God,

they are watched over in their sleep, and they offer hospitality and love to visitors.”³² In exploring the home life of the women of Rosengard with their adult children, I found that it was virtually without exception the mothers who taught the children their prayers, although the fathers were also involved in the religious exercises in the home. It was generally also the mothers who were most actively engaged in story-telling, including family history, although the fathers also participated in some cases. Joanne Klassen, reflecting on the importance of stories and the influence of her grandmother, recalls that,

*“Through the stories of my grandmother I have revisited my family history many times The lives, words and attitudes (my emphasis) passed on to me have been models to me, have brought me insight into my own self, have caused sorrow and have cultivated empathy.”*³³

Pamela Klassen, in interpreting the religious lives of the two Mennonite refugee women she interviewed, concludes:

*“In writing this version of their lives, we three have told stories that fill the gaps where women’s lives should be: gaps in the scholarly canon, in Mennonite history, and in the storytelling that shapes boys and girls into women and men (my emphasis).”*³⁴

There is no doubt that the stories of the Russlaender women of Rosengard have also shaped the lives of their families and their communities. It is through stories that we are reminded that the reactions to events surrounding us are what history is essentially about.³⁵ The family members I interviewed told the stories of their mothers in a variety of ways that included describing the foods they ate, the manner in which these were prepared, and the circumstances under which they were eaten. They also showed up in the reverence that their mothers showed with respect to food which included a strong reminder, as expressed by one participant in my study, that there were others in the world who were starving, and that we were liable to also experience such deprivation if we dared to grumble about the food that was given to us.³⁶

The Premigration Lives of Russlaender Women

In the context of my research, the very fact that a mother would remind her children of the specter of people who are starving in other parts of the world is a

reflection of her own experiences prior to coming to Canada. In the Introduction to *Sisters or Strangers?*, the authors make the observation that the premigration lives of some of the subjects have a significant place in some of the essays in the book. They also raise the reality that the phenomenon of migration is felt in the lives of future generations.³⁷ That these realities existed for the women who are the subject of my research and by their children cannot be doubted. I personally recall growing up with the concept of the *iron curtain*. There was never any doubt in our minds that this was a reference to the land from which the Russlaender had managed to escape. It was also the place where members of our extended families remained.

The Russlaender women in adapting to their new homeland and the circumstances under which they made these adaptations, however, remained mindful of the lives they had lived in another time and place. Their sense of identity was securely tied to the land in which they and their ancestors had been born even though their faith and ethnicity were always different from that of their fellow citizens. Yet “Canadian historians of immigration have been reluctant to fully address the premigration lives of immigrants as formative of who they are and how they negotiate their lives in Canada.”³⁸ Given that more than seven decades later, their children still retain that sense of having grown up in a Mennonite home with values that uniquely expressed that identity, there is no doubt that the premigration lives of the Russlaender women in my study figured very prominently in the way they negotiated their lives in Canada, where they were once again an ethnic and religious minority. All of the women who are the subject of my research had lived their childhood and youth in the land of their birth. Their premigration lives included, in many instances, the loss of their parents and siblings, and in some cases also the death of one or more of their own children. *Henrietta* commented “I think mother had a happy childhood, but somewhat of a troubled youth. Mother’s brother was murdered – something she never got over. I think partly the reason for her seriousness in life.” She then continues, “Early years of married life must have been difficult. She lost her first child. Was very ill coming to Canada. Then with children coming quickly and adjusting to a new country must have made being mother and wife difficult.” *Karla* commented that her mother told stories about Russia and that she “Liked to talk about the good times.” *Linda*, in speaking about her mother observed that she,

“had a difficult life during her youth and she would sometimes talk about it but never really with a complaining attitude or sounding bitter. She spoke of her mother but unfortunately lost her early in her life. Once her mother passed away, our mother grew up in a blended family which no doubt had its own challenges.”

Birth Stories as a Source of Memory and Meaning

Regrettably, if these stories of the daily lives of our mothers have not been told, neither have their birth stories. Joan Thomas expresses this sad thought very fittingly when she observes that “[t]he stories of how we give birth are among the most joyous and momentous stories we have, but until recently they have been held in the hearts of women”.³⁹ Pamela E. Klassen in reviewing the book, *In Her Own Voice* observes, “[r]eading their stories makes plain again and again that childbirth is a rich site of memory and meaning in women’s lives.”⁴⁰

By today’s standards families in Rosengard were generally large, six or seven children in a family not being uncommon, and in some instances, many more. Although the actual birth accounts of these women are no longer available to us, their stories come through in bits and pieces, here and there. I personally remember my mother reflecting on the joy that she always experienced in preparation for the birth of her next baby. It was a fact that there was little money for new baby items, but simply getting out the old baby clothes, washing them and generally preparing for the arrival of the new baby already gave my mother pleasure and excitement. Those thoughts were expressed many years after the last of the babies had been born. How much more powerful those stories would have been had they been shared as these events were actually unfolding. Katherine Martens captured that thought very well when she recalled interviewing Helen Wedel, one of the participants in her study of stories of childbirth – “The memory of sitting at her table for an hour to listen spellbound to her life story is imprinted on my mind as an image of the link between the generations (Martens’ emphasis).”⁴¹ Given that “the moment of childbearing, more than any other, represents the coming together of ‘nature’ and ‘culture’” such sharing of stories, or at best, what’s left of them (my emphasis), must be encouraged. Indeed, in order to develop ‘reproductive consciousness’ we must begin by “paying attention to this crucial moment in which historical continuity is mediated and reproduced.”⁴²

In a sense such historical continuity has been negotiated for one participant in my study who more than six decades later retains a hand-written notebook given to her by her mother in 1945. This notebook contains detailed instructions on how to bake *Pasji* (Easter bread) and how to make *Plumi Moos* (a fruit compote).⁴³ These were two of the indispensable foods to be served at Easter. The mother, anticipating that she would not be at home for the holiday that year because she was expecting the imminent birth of her next child, nevertheless wanted to ensure that her family would not be lacking for anything when celebrating Easter, and hence the written instructions to her teenage daughter. According to Marlene Epp women have historically had an important measure of control over food preparation and distribution in a household, thereby influencing others both materially and magically.⁴⁴ The mother’s agency in providing the wherewithal for her daughter to prepare appropriate Easter meals in this instance is remarkable. Neither the food, nor its magical impact would be lacking for her family at Easter. As a sign of those times, this mother did not however, tell her daughter why she expected to be away -- another indication that birth stories were not easily shared.

Because the giving of birth was considered such a private and personal event, some of the individuals participating in this study, who are now in the ninth decade of their lives, still vividly recall being sent to stay with friends or neighbours during a home birth in their families, in one case actually spending the night at the neighbour’s house, but not being told why they were being sent away.⁴⁵ In the past, regrettably, these birth stories were rarely, if ever told. In the words of Joan Thomas,

*“[w]hat struck me also was the gift she [Katherine Martens] and Heidi Harms gave each woman by creating a situation where the value of their stories would be recognized. This is so important, because eventually, for most of us, the memory becomes what is told (my emphasis).”*⁴⁶

Thomas concludes the Foreword with the thought that “[b]irth stories are (Thomas’s emphasis) obligatory for a meaningful account of women’s lives. The stories in *In Her Own Voice* provide one of the missing threads of our social narrative.”⁴⁷ In spite of the fact that we feel free, almost compelled to speak about the end of life, we seem to have been loathe to speak about its beginning.⁴⁸

Creating a Sense of Dignity

Given that the women in my study lived within a patriarchal system, perhaps it is not surprising that they were not encouraged or given the opportunity to share their birth stories with their families and their community, even though these experiences were so essential to their lives. They were, in a very real sense, being discriminated against. Nevertheless, despite such discrimination, these women knew how to create dignity for themselves in their own unique ways.⁴⁹ One of the parties interviewed in my study recalled his mother’s artistic abilities and her capacity for and enjoyment of organising social activities in the community.⁵⁰ It could truly be said of her that she had found ways to create a sense of worth for herself. According to John Unrau, writing the text for a book highlighting the paintings of Mary Klassen, his mother, the creativity of Mennonite women has been repressed, having been limited to activities such as cake-decorating and quilting.⁵¹ However, much like Mary Klassen who was able to adapt to her circumstances as evidenced by the materials from which she derived the colours for her paintings,⁵² Rosengard’s women also knew how to be creative, both in the context of the use of material resources as well as in the opportunities that were open to them.

She Knew How to Make it Work

Many examples were alluded to by all of the research participants interviewed for this project that reflected ways in which these women were indeed able to exercise agency within very limited and limiting circumstances. The women were invariably the ones who prepared the meals and did the baking. If a family ran out of bread, the participants, without hesitation, responded that their mothers made *Schnetji* [biscuits] or some variation thereof such as fried flat cakes or fried strips of dough. There was no suggestion that any of the mothers were ever at a loss as to how to provide meals on a regular and timely basis, regardless of how poor the family was. Going to a store to make purchases in an emergency was only mentioned on one occasion.⁵³ This is not surprising, given that there was no store in the neighbourhood with the exception of one small outlet which ceased to exist when that family moved to Steinbach in 1938. In any event, the families were generally not well off, and buying ‘convenience’ food of any sort was out of the question. One of the participants simply stated “she made it work” if some of the required ingredients were not available.⁵⁴ Marlene Epp has explored at length the importance of mothers

providing food for their children:

“Because the preparation and distribution of food is traditionally such a gendered function, the activity of cooking and eating during times of both feast and famine present challenges and opportunity of especial significance to women.”⁵⁵

Surely the experiences of the women in my study, and their astonishing capacity for adaptation need to be looked at with a new approach focusing on admiration and respect.

Looking at Women Through New Eyes

The importance of seeing these women from a fresh perspective cannot be overstated. David Walter-Toews in being interviewed, along with Patrick Friesen, by Margaret Loewen Reimer and Paul Gerard Tiessen, makes the observation “How well you see is dependent on your eyes, not the type of window.” In response the interviewers point out “That’s what both of you are doing. You are giving people eyes to see with. You’re creating human beings out of Mennonites.”⁵⁶ The Russlaender women in this research need to be seen through such new eyes, rather than be viewed as merely doing their duty. I had the distinct impression that the sons and daughters who participated in my research had already learned to see their mothers with these new lenses. In that same discussion, Friesen, commenting on his father, says

“The main thing I learned from my father in life and especially in death was an incredible sense of dignity and honour and grace. You know, it’s really beyond my imagination that someone could die that well.”⁵⁷

In my mind the women I researched portrayed those qualities on a daily basis in the way they adapted to the circumstances in which their lives evolved. In addition to bereavement experienced by at least four of the families during the 1930s and 1940s,⁵⁸ most if not all of them had already lived through death and personal loss prior to arriving in their new homeland.⁵⁹ From the interviews undertaken in this context, there is no doubt in my mind that grace and dignity characterised the lives of these women. They held their heads high in every way, including sending their children to school where the mothers knew that the language of instruction would be one which the parents did not speak. It cannot have been lost on the women that their children would encounter new ideas to which their

parents had never been exposed in the land of their birth.⁶⁰ This was no doubt the reason why in my own home we were not to speak English, as an attempt to retain our own language and culture as much as possible. Yet this did not stop the women from ensuring that their children would receive the education that they needed to function within this new homeland. In response to questions concerning getting to school on time⁶¹ and doing homework, most participants recalled their mothers being actively engaged, although both parents were involved. One individual recalled “Mom made the braids” [before the child left for school].⁶² It would not have occurred to any of the families that children would leave for school without proper grooming. Members of one family recalled that their mother would ensure that they were out on the road in time to catch a ride with the neighbours when their father was away.⁶³ This would be especially important during very cold weather. School attendance and the well-being of their children were taken seriously by the mothers in question.

Agency as a Balancing Act

If Rosengard’s families had been small, such attention to detail as regards school attendance might not have been so exceptional. However, as noted earlier, the families in this study were large; they certainly did not fail a “significant test of citizenship,” a view expressed by Veronica Strong-Boag with respect to the inability on the part of women to bear children.⁶⁴ Indeed, given that large families were considered desirable in Mennonite communities in the past, women were pregnant during much of their childbearing years. According to Loewen “... when they were not pregnant they were nursing infants, or recovering from childbirth, or caring for sick children. Childrearing was an all-consuming life for the quarter century after marriage.”⁶⁵ This was true also of the women of my research as they too bore numerous children. Nevertheless there was a certain element of agency that was possible even in that context. Agency, after all, according to Kerry Fast, “holds in balance both possibility and constraint.”⁶⁶ In the case of Fast’s study, the subject in question had to work through an extremely difficult domestic situation within the context of a very conservative church. However, even in less challenging circumstances, agency always calls for a balance between what can reasonably be achieved while at the same time maintaining equilibrium and stability. For example, although all of the mothers in my research did the kneading and baking

of bread all of the time, until the daughters were old enough to help, several research respondents mentioned their fathers pitching in ‘sometimes’ in case of emergency or advanced pregnancy.⁶⁷ Even though pregnancy may not always have been avoidable for the women, a small degree of respite nevertheless presented itself for them amidst their frequent pregnancies. Such a practical response by their husbands to their multiple pregnancies may have been a small measure of recognition and respect for these women. It was in a sense analogous to the circumstances of Luzina Tousignant who found it necessary to leave her isolated island home once every year for the arrival of her next baby as described so well by Gabrielle Roy.⁶⁸

Bringing a jar of chicken noodle soup to a new mother was also standard practise in our community. One of the individuals who was interviewed remembered very distinctly as a child taking a jar of soup to the neighbour lady down the road, following the birth of twin babies.⁶⁹ There was no doubt that the women in my study were always busy and generally not well off financially. Yet there was an ability on their part to empathise with others and to be neighbourly and supportive.

Naehverein in Rosengard

That the women in my study knew how important it was to have the support and encouragement of other women is evident in various ways, including the fact that they organised themselves into an informal society referred to as *Naehverein* (Sewing Society). Gloria Neufeld Redekop in addressing issues relating to the invisibility of women in much of the writing about Mennonites observes that the extent of their participation in *Vereine* (Societies) has also not been acknowledged nor the importance it held for women. It is her position that a gap exists in Mennonite history because it does not include the history of its women. Neufeld Redekop goes on to ask why it was that the women organised themselves by means of *Vereine* and what such participation meant for them.⁷⁰ Several of the participants in my research highlighted the importance of *Naehverein* for the women in question.⁷¹ These gatherings were held at different homes by turns, and at least one research participant recalled preparations in her home for a *Naehverein* meeting. Another individual recalled a cake her mother had baked for such an occasion which had been a spectacular success. However, her mother, having been creative in simply using the ingredients that were available to her, was unable to provide a

specific recipe to the other women. Recipe exchanges however were common at these meetings according to several individuals who were interviewed. Sewing patterns were also exchanged according to one participant.⁷² Considering that there was very little money for anything beyond the absolute basics needed by their families, either for recipe books or dress patterns, such sharing speaks of a generous and supportive mindset among the women and is a fine example of agency. The use of the expression “she knew how to make it work”⁷³ by one research participant is also applicable to these circumstances. For the women of Rosengard, these meetings were vital in all respects, including their social and spiritual enrichment. The *Naehverein*, although well organised by the women at the local level, was not part of any specific church structure, and was therefore non-denominational.⁷⁴ It was truly an example of the strength of these women and of their capacity to create dignity for themselves, which itself was an exercise in agency.

What is particularly striking to me is a series of three photographs taken at these *Naehverein* gatherings over a period of approximately a decade. Indeed when Veronica Strong-Boag speaks of tapping into an expanded definition of historical sources that were not used in the past in order better to assess and analyse the contributions of women, the use of photographs might well be included.⁷⁵ Neufeld Redekop also confirms the value of such additional non-conventional sources when she states “[t]he acceptability of these sources for historiography meant that the documentation of the history of ordinary women began to be regarded as valuable and legitimate.”⁷⁶ The large range of individuals who attended the *Naehverein* in Rosengard, both in terms of age and denominational background which included women of both the first and the second wave of Mennonite immigrants speaks of an inclusivity that is truly remarkable. All of the women in attendance look well groomed. This is notable, given that the photographs represent an era when the families were generally poor. One photograph, taken during the 1930s is particularly significant in this respect given the unrelenting challenges of the Depression. What these photographs reveal is that the women displayed an ability to make the best of difficult circumstances. Given that many of them had large young families and had little time for themselves, it is particularly notable that they found ways in which to nurture their own spirits. The viability of this *Naehverein*, both in terms of its duration of at least a decade, as well as the



Photos of women in the Rosengard Naehverein in the 1930s

important function it served demonstrates the enormous capacity of these women for adaptation under very demanding conditions. Unlike the women to whom Mary Swartley⁷⁷ makes reference, who were only expected to make their ideas and concerns

known indirectly through their fathers, husbands, or brothers, the women in my study knew how to express themselves albeit in their own limited circumstances.⁷⁸

Although these women demonstrated that they could communicate with each

other and found ways to strengthen their emotional and spiritual needs, it is regrettable that, in the words of Neufeld Redekop, “so much of women’s experience remains hidden.”⁷⁹ She then expands on that thought by stating that women must be given an opportunity to “speak for themselves.”⁸⁰ The women who are the subject of this research paper can no longer do so. However, judging by the views and observations made by their children, there is much that they could have told the world had they been encouraged to do so. Indeed, who can tell how our community would have evolved had women felt free to express how life looked to them, rather than always looking to the needs of those around them. Royden Loewen in his introduction to *From the Inside Out* observes that Mennonites across the whole spectrum of society kept diaries. He then goes on to say, “Clearly, religion, ethnicity, and class drew women and men to share common concerns and perceptions, but gender affected what was said and left unsaid (my emphasis).”⁸¹ If it occurred to the women of Rosengard that their own needs were not being met, I don’t think the rest of us heard them say it. Katie Funk Wiebe expresses what they perhaps also may have felt on occasion when she writes “... to accept the traditional mold for women seemed to crush my own personhood. ... I needed to accept myself as I was....”⁸² Neufeld Redekop, quoting Ruth Pierson and Alison Prentice, captures well the injustices that women have experienced when she states

“one of the basic oppressions that women suffer is the silencing of their whole experience, both negative and positive. A basic injustice that feminists wish to redress, therefore, is inequality in terms of visibility. What feminists demand is the right to know and understand the experience of women and to have it analyzed, taken into account, recorded and valued (my emphases).”⁸³

Women as Accessories

Lorraine Roth writing on the composition of 19th century settlers in an Ontario community in Wilmot Township, which included Amish and Mennonite neighbours, observes that the head of the household was usually male “and his wife was an accessory, albeit an indispensable one.”⁸⁴

If women were considered accessories in 19th century Wilmot Township, it seems that the women of Rosengard had not become much more visible during the time period of my research. A newspaper column entitled *Hochruecken Neuigkeiten*

(High Ridge News) which for several decades was regularly featured in the German language *Steinbach Post*, a rural Manitoba community newspaper, and which provided local news relating to the community of Rosengard, routinely detailed the activities of the men, occasionally also mentioning women. When news items relating to women occurred, their first names were virtually never mentioned. So, for example, the birth of a daughter at the *Franz T. Friesens* is noted in the May 13, 1942 issue of the paper, but no reference is made to the mother’s or the daughter’s name. Similarly the October 20, 1947 edition of the paper announces that the Cornelius Warkentins are happy about a little daughter brought home from the hospital by Mrs. Warkentin. The reader once again has no knowledge of either Mrs. Warkentin’s name or that of the daughter. Indeed, neither account clearly indicates whether these children were adopted or whether the women gave birth to them.⁸⁵

Rosengard’s women were not accessories. They were engaged in their communities in the fullest sense of the word. A photograph taken in approximately 1938, on the occasion of a school picnic bears ample evidence of that. Women by the score can be seen in this print and some men are also visible in the background. Nearby are boxes and kettles presumably

together. It is quite apparent that the key facilitators of this event were the women who could make a celebration even in the depths of economic hardships.

Gender, which according to James Urry “is part of the matrix of belonging, and should not be considered separately from other parts of social identity,”⁸⁶ nevertheless affected what the women in my study were able to do and what they could not do.⁸⁷ According to Carol Penner, the fact that Mennonite women in the past spent their lives largely in the private sphere may well mean that the materials available in archival sources will be too limiting to form a good image of those lives.⁸⁸ It is for these reasons that oral and other non-traditional sources needed to be explored in order to provide a more complete picture of how the Russlaender women of Rosengard lived their lives and how they were able to adapt to the difficult times in which they lived. Those sources too form part of our cultural landscape.⁸⁹ If it were not for the stories that we share, how would we know about the anguish of one participant’s mother when a wood chip caught her in the eye? With only bush surrounding the yard, and no one at home for weeks on end but young children, what would happen to her should she lose her sight in that eye?⁹⁰

Marlene Epp addresses the importance of ‘social memory’ which has the capacity



A 1938 school picnic in Rosengard.

filled with food and beverage. What is particularly significant about this scene is the very long stretch of white cloths laid out on the grass, covered with food, and children sitting down on both sides. Everyone is dressed up for the occasion. Keeping in mind that the community was still in the throes of the Depression of the 1930s, it is especially memorable that this school district knew how to have a good time

for either paralleling or contradicting the memory of the individual.⁹¹ It was remarkable to me that many of the responses to my questions were surprisingly similar or parallel, to use Epp’s term. I heard invariably from all the participants that *the women simply adapted to their circumstances* be it in coping with hardships and disappointments, or in using whatever resources were available to them under a variety of

circumstances. Flour and sugar sacks were routinely used in sewing.⁹² If the luscious fruit to which they were accustomed in Ukraine could not be had, chokecherries and wild plums were substituted.⁹³ That virtually none of these achievements were recorded is truly lamentable; it's almost as if the lives of these women had been erased.⁹⁴ That is what makes the idea of shared memory so important. Perhaps in this way we will be able to salvage some of our stories, because, as Epp goes on to say

*"The idea of a shared memory is particularly relevant for a society or ethnic group such as Mennonites, one that imbues history with religious significance and for whom, as has been said about the Jews, 'the memory of history is a religious duty.'"*⁹⁵

The women in my research had a remarkable capacity for adaptation also in the context of cultivating relationships both with their families and also within their community, even though they had experienced so many losses in this respect so early in their lives. Julia Kasdorf expresses the importance of such relationships very effectively when she says

*"Perhaps the most profound aspect of human experience is that we live in relationship. As infants, the first thing we learn is to recognize our mothers. We receive our names from others; others teach us our language and culture; our survival and quality of life always depend on how well we develop and negotiate relationships with others."*⁹⁶

The participants in my research would have no difficulty agreeing that their mothers had a similar effect on their families, namely that of developing and cultivating relationships.

The thoughts of the youngest participant in my study express it well:

*"When I think of our Mother I can't but marvel at her strength and her strong faith that she maintained throughout the years in spite of many challenges she endured – leaving her home in the Ukraine with all its memories. The hardships they endured in their exodus to Canada, the culture shock, language barrier and extreme poverty, not to mention the loneliness I'm sure they must have endured. Throughout all this Mom remained a pillar to her family and no doubt to her friends."*⁹⁷

Interestingly, during the conduct of my research, I observed a beneficial effect

upon the participants. That effect was itself a validation for them of their own experiences as children and young people, in the context of their families and community. This was an unanticipated but truly valuable benefit.

I feel I must reiterate the sentiments expressed by Lorraine Roth when she says, "[f]or the inspiration I have received from the women in these pages ... I am deeply grateful. May their species endure!"⁹⁸

Endnotes

1 Julia Kasdorf. *The Body and the Book: Writing from a Mennonite Life*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), p. 6. Kasdorf explores the sense of connection and continuity that people develop to the place where they belong: "At some point, I'd already learned that being related to people can make you belong to a place. Land, when it has sustained families for generations, does not easily let go of a body."

2 Marlene Epp. "Victims of the Times, Heroes of their Lives: Five Mennonite Refugee Women," in *Rethinking Canada*, ed. by Veronica Strong-Boag, Mona Gleason, and Adele Perry, (Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 270. "...[R]efugee women were victims of social and political events that caused tragedy and loss in their lives. The families were torn apart, they experienced violence and hunger, and they lost opportunities for education and professional development. However, in a context in which they had limited choices, all of the women developed strategies for survival and accomplishment."

3 Such as for example, the murder of a brother as expressed by both *Edwin* and *Henrietta*, as well as the death of two children in a refugee camp as conveyed by *Anna* and *Cathy*, in addition to the universal upheaval to the Mennonite way of life caused by the Russian Revolution..

4 My parents' passport, for example, issued by the USSR on November 29, 1928, is in three languages, namely Russian, Ukrainian and French. My father's naturalization certificate, dated May 19, 1937, making him a British subject, is on the other hand, in English. In 1949 my mother had to appear in the County Court of Jolys in St. Pierre, Manitoba in order to obtain her Canadian citizenship. This was an experience she had never had in the land of her birth, and was certainly conducted in a language that at the time still remained essentially foreign to her.

5 None of my mother's family came to Canada prior to November, 1948. Twenty years after my mother and her younger sister had said their good-byes in their village in Ukraine, these two women were re-united in our home in Rosengard. In fact, during my early childhood we had no close relatives living in our community or even in the surrounding area. *Anna*, when asked about what her mother said regarding her own mother, aunts, and grandmother, responded "very little was ever said." She also observed that "the memories were too traumatic." *Karla* indicated that none of her mother's family came to Canada prior to World War II, and that it was very special when her mother's sister together with her son arrived in their home following the War.

6 See also Frances Swyripa, "Ancestors, the Land, and Ethno-religious Identity on the Canadian Prairies: Comparing the Mennonite and Ukrainian Legacies" *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, 21 (2003) p. 46, reflecting on the reality that for early settlers, burying their dead on Canadian prairies, "drove home the finality of the decision to uproot and relocate (my emphasis)." The finality of their decision to emigrate was not lost

on the Russlaender either. Several participants in my research made reference to their mothers having lost their own mothers at an early age: *Linda* observed, "She spoke of her mother but unfortunately lost her early in her life." *Isaac* responded "She was 9 when her mother passed away."

7 Pamela E. Klassen, *Going by the Moon and the Stars: Stories of Two Russian Mennonite Women* (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1994), p.2.

8 Ibid. Klassen goes on to say "... [b]y asking questions about which stories take their place in Mennonite history, I wish to take my place with other Mennonite women embarking on the disassembling of patriarchal Mennonite history and epistemology, which has left so little space for women's lives, thoughts, and power. In this process of taking apart the silences and patching together the stories, my work may have implications for other religious traditions."

9 Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock* (Toronto: Bantam Books, August, 1971) p. 2

10 Ibid., p. 3.

11 Ibid., p. 418.

12 I personally recall my mother reading a letter in our home sometime during the early 1960s which had been written to my parents in 1937 by a member of my extended family who remained in Ukraine. I still recall my mother's observation that the truth of what was happening in their former homeland was obviously veiled by the language used by the writer in an attempt to ensure his safety.

13 Gail Cuthbert Brandt, "Postmodern Patchwork: Some Recent Trends in the Writing of Women's History in Canada," in *The Canadian Historical Review*, 72 (1991), p. 441.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid., p. 449.

16 See also, Manitoba Labour and Immigration, "The Changing Face of Manitoba's Workforce," in *About Women*, Spring 2007, p. 1. "But despite this growth [of women in the workforce], women are still considered the primary caregivers in the family. They are more likely to look after the children and care for elderly family members. Women also tend to shoulder the bulk of other family and household responsibilities."

17 Joy Parr, "Gender History and Historical Practice," *The Canadian Historical Review*, 76 (1995), p. 362f.

18 Marlene Epp, "Women in Canadian Mennonite History: Uncovering the 'Underside'," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 5 (1987), p. 90 expresses the view that "[t]o explore a dimension of past events which has been neglected in traditional historical research and writing, involves the recognition that history has not only an objective, academic purpose, but that to understand the history of any group is important for their own sense of self." See also Wilma Ann Bailey, "Gender in the Old Testament," in *Women & Men: Gender in the Church*, ed. Carol Penner. (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1998). "From the stories we do have, we know that women played a crucial role at critical times in Israel. The religious life of women was vibrant, Finally, the clear prohibition against creating images of God that are cast in human form should lead us to rethink our language and visual images of God." p. 20.

19 Ibid., p. 104.

20 Royden K. Loewen, "The Children, the Cows, My Dear Man and My Sister": The Transplanted Lives of Mennonite Farm Women, 1874-1900," *The Canadian Historical Review* (1992), p.352.

21 Judith C. Kulig, et al., *Growing Up as a Woman: The Health Perspectives of Low-German-Speaking Mennonite Women*. A study of the School of Health Sciences, University of Lethbridge, Alberta, 2006.

22 Royden K. Loewen, "The Children, the Cows, My Dear Man and My Sister": The Transplanted Lives of Mennonite Farm Women, 1874-1900," *The Canadian Historical Review* (1992), p.352.

23 According to *Martin* "In our household Mom planned and prepared all the meals. ... [She] prepared a lot of pasta dishes mainly out of economic necessity. ... I remember our Mother baking home made bread – both white (bulchi) & brown as well as buns (baked only for the weekend)." *Henrietta* commented "Mother, I think did not enjoy much of the housework. However she always prepared the meals as best as she could as well as the baking. It gave her pleasure to make sort of 'special' meals when one of us had a birthday." *Betty* commented that her mother made "tea and platz for lunch for a change."

24 Marlene Epp, "The Semiotics of Zwieback: Feast and Famine in the Narratives of Mennonite Refugee Women," in *Sister or Strangers?* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press Incorporated, 2004), p. 315. In response to my research question regarding whether the family ate "Mennonite" food, *Linda* said "For the most part I would say that we were eating 'Mennonite' food with perhaps later on the odd English dish"

25 *Edwin* observed "Mother's big story was about her brother's murder."

26 Both *Anna* and *Cathy* spoke of this loss.

27 Marlene Epp, *Women Without Men: Mennonite Refuges of the Second World War*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), p.6, with reference to footnote 11 quoting Ellen Cole, Oliva M. Espin, and Esther D. Rothblum., eds., *Refugee Women and Their Mental Health, Shattered Societies, Shattered Lives* (Binghamton, NY: Harrington Park Press 1992), 2. "The authors in this collection of essays offer a variety of definitions [of refugee immigrants], depending on the particular national and political context being explored."

28 Marlene Epp, 5f.

29 When my husband met my mother more than four decades after she arrived in her new homeland, he asked her how she felt when she arrived in Canada. Her response was that she would have gone back had she had the money. To me, this is an astonishing revelation given that she had already experienced so much fear, turmoil and uncertainty in Ukraine. What it does speak to however is the fact that the future indeed looked grim even though there was the hope of freedom in her new homeland.

30 Pamela E. Klassen, *Going by the Moon and the Stars* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1994), p.3.

31 *Ibid.*

32 *Ibid.*, p. 91.

33 Joanne Klassen, "Tell Me the One About ...?," in *All Are Witnesses: A Collection of Sermons by Mennonite Brethren Women*, ed. By Delores Friesen (Winnipeg: Kindred Productions, 1996), p. 31f.

34 Pamela E. Klassen, *Going by the Moon*, p. 138.

35 Angela Showalter, "A Society in Disintegration" as preface to *A Life Displaced: A Mennonite Woman's Flight from War-Torn Poland*, by Edna Schroeder Thiessen and Angela Showalter. (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, co-published with Herald Press, Waterloo, ON, 2000), p.22.

36 *Martin*: "If we were dissatisfied with the food, Mom reminded us of the starving people who were not as fortunate as we were." *David* recalls expressing displeasure with the food that his mother had prepared as he felt it wasn't adequate for his appetite. His mother responded "Eck docht eck haud sonne goode Moos gemaucht" (I thought I had made such good Moos.) Some six decades later *David* obviously still feels guilty because of his lack of appreciation for his mother's efforts. *Anna*: "We were just glad to have food."

37 *Sisters or Strangers? Immigrant, Ethnic and Racialized Women in Canadian History*. Edited by Marlene Epp, Franca Iacovetta, Frances Swyripa. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), p. 9.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 13.

39 Joan Thomas, "Foreword", in *In Her Own Voice:*

Childbirth Stories from Mennonite Women. Collected, edited, and translated by Katherine Martens and Heidi Harms, with a foreword by Joan Thomas, (Winnipeg: The University of Manitoba Press, 1997) p. vii.

40 Klassen, Pamela E., review of *In Her Own Voice: Childbirth Stories from Mennonite Women*. Collected, edited, and translated by Katherine Martens and Heidi Harms, with a foreword by Joan Thomas, in *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, 16, (1998), p. 259-261.

41 Katherine Martens and Heidi Harms, *In Her Own Voice: Childbirth Stories from Mennonite Women*. Collected, edited, and translated by Katherine Martens and Heidi Harms, with a foreword by Joan Thomas, (Winnipeg: The University of Manitoba Press, 1997) p. 16.

42 Di Brandt, *Wild Mother Dancing* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1993) p. 139.

43 *Freda's* recollection.

44 Epp, "The Semiotics of Zwieback", "In times of both famine and feast, the consumption of food and communication about food hold meaning particularly applicable to gender." p. 315

45 *Betty, Freda, David* and *Cathy* all recalled having to go to the neighbours when a baby was about to be born in the home, but none of them were told why they were going. *Betty* specifically recalled having to sleep on the floor in the bedroom of the neighbour's daughter, and being cold. *Freda* remembers being allowed to visit a neighbour's home on a Sunday afternoon, an opportunity that did not often arise.

46 Thomas, *In Her Own Voice*. p. xi.

47 *Ibid.* The reference to the word *obligatory* is in response to a derisive comment made by a reviewer where he commented that Margaret Laurence had included "the obligatory account of childbirth" in one of her novels.

48 Pamela E. Klassen, *Blessed Events: Religion and Home Birth in America*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), quoting Carol H. Poston, 1978 – "Unlike death, its only competitor as an essential human experience, birth has an involved witness who lives to tell the story, a birthing woman. Her experience is of universal importance, because it is she who is caught up in that elemental activity, childbirth, with hurricane intensity. And it is her story that is rarely, if ever, told." p. 1.

49 *Ibid.*, The writers of *Sisters or Strangers?* acknowledge that "... our subjects often are women who, despite ability, did not have similar educational opportunities [as those of the authors], who worked hard, **endured discrimination of many varieties** (my emphasis), and found ways to create dignity for themselves." p. 15.

50 *Edwin*: "Mom was esteemed in the community for her artistic and other contributions." He was also aware of one of the neighbours crediting his mother for the influence she had on this woman's spiritual life, as well as the significant influence his mother had on the life of one particular young woman in the neighbourhood.

51 John Unrau, *The Balancings of the Clouds: Paintings of Mary Klassen* (Winnipeg: Windflower Communications, 1991) p. 14.

52 *Ibid.* Mary Klassen used laundry blue, brown clothes dye, beet, carrot and dandelion juice, and green extracted from leaves for the colours she needed for her paintings.

53 Comment made by *Edwin*.

54 Point made by *David*.

55 Epp, "The Semiotics of Zwieback", p. 336.

56 Margaret Loewen Reimer and Paul Gerard Tiessen, in a discussion with Patrick Friesen and David Walther-Toews on "The Poetry and Distemper of Patrick Friesen and David Walther-Toews" in *Visions and Realities*, ed. By Harry Loewen and Al Reimer (Winnipeg: Hyperion Press, 1985), p.252.

57 *Ibid.*, p. 249.

58 *Karla's* father, for example, died leaving her

mother a widow with seven children, the youngest of whom was 4 years old.

59 One family lost two children in a refugee camp in Germany prior to coming to Canada.

60 Adolf Ens, "The Public School Crisis Among Mennonites in Saskatchewan 1916-25" in *Mennonite Images: Historical, Cultural, and Literary Essay Dealing With Mennonite Issues*, ed. by Harry Loewen (Winnipeg: Hyperion Press Limited, 1980), p.73. "In this process [assimilation of immigrant children] the public school was a key institution. While the cultural background of the alien was to be given full consideration in developing a school system for Saskatchewan, nevertheless, the 'splendid Anglo-Saxon inheritance transplanted to the new soil craves the perpetuation of cultural standards of the highest type.'" p. 74. That those same aspirations also applied in Manitoba in the decades to follow is amply demonstrated by the fact that I personally remember fellow students being given the strap [by a Mennonite teacher] for speaking Low German at recess.

61 Anna Friesen and Victor Carl Friesen, *The Mulberry Tree*, (Winnipeg: Queenston House Publishing Co. Ltd., 1985), "If we were in time for school, my day was saved; but if we were late, my whole day was ruined. In our roll-call in the morning all students answered with a 'Present' except those who came in after nine o'clock. They answered with a 'Late.' How I hated that word!" p. 79. I personally remember how utterly mortified I was, indeed to the point of tears when I arrived a minute or two late, and had to request, at the back of the room "Please excuse me that I'm late!"

62 *Cathy's* observation.

63 Both *Edwin* and *Henrietta* commented on this.

64 Veronica Strong-Boag, *Finding Families Finding Ourselves* (Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 2006), p.81.

65 Royden K. Loewen, *Family, Church, and Market* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), p. 40.

66 Kerry L. Fast in "Religion, Pain, and the Body: Agency in the Life of an Old Colony Mennonite Woman," *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, 22(2004), p. 105.

67 *George* in responding to a question regarding kneading and baking, commented: "Mostly mother but in my days at home I remember dad on occasion." *Edwin* remembered that his father once did the kneading in an emergency. *Julie* observed, "Mother did the baking but her daughter had to do the kneading because of her heart condition." Her eldest sister however said "Mother" reflecting perhaps the relative age of the participants, and the evolution of the family. I also noted this variation in the responses of some other participants.

68 Gabrielle Roy, *Where Nests the Water Hen*_(Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1951) p. 15. "It was the mother who travelled the most. Almost every year she of necessity went to Sainte Rose du Lac. If there were the slightest hitch, you could spend days getting there; all the same, since she quit her island approximately but once a year, this long, hard trip, frequently hazardous, always exhausting, had come to be regarded by Luzina Tousignan as her annual holiday."

69 This was *Linda's* recollection. Interestingly too she recalled asking the new mother how she was now feeling, but having been gently chided for this by her own mother, presumably because childbirth stories were not an area in which children were expected to engage. It was decidedly a topic of conversation that did not receive much attention.

70 Gloria Neufeld Redekop, *The Work of Their Hands: Mennonite Women's Societies in Canada* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1996), p. 15.

71 *Isaac* makes reference to his mother attending. *Henrietta* observed "Mother was indeed a good friend to many women. She was active in the ladies fellow-

ship.” Both *Betty* and *Linda* remember Naehverein in their home. *Anna* and *Betty* were both aware of recipes being shared at these gatherings.

72 *Anna* commented specifically on dress patterns being shared.

73 *David’s* comment.

74 *Edwin* specifically observed that the interdenominational aspect of the Naehverein was not an issue. He also noted that the social and spiritual purposes of these meetings were very valuable to the women.

75 Veronica Strong-Boag, “Writing About Women,” in *Writing About Canada: A Handbook for Modern Canadian History*, ed. By John Schultz (Scarborough: Prentice-Hall Canada Inc., 1990), p. 181.

76 Redekop, *Work of Their Hands*, p. 16. These additional sources included archival materials, routinely generated records, oral histories, registers, artefacts, autobiographies, local historical records, letters and diaries, the organizational records of women’s clubs and religious organizations.

77 Mary Swartley & Rhoda Keener, ed., *She Has Done a Good Thing* (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1999), p. 19.

78 *Edwin* remarked on his mother’s capacity for organising social activities. In response to the question: Did she feel she had an important part to play in her position as a wife, a mother, a friend and as a member of the community, *George* responded, “Very much so.”

79 Redekop, *Work of Their Hands*, p. 18.

80 *Ibid.*, p. 19.

81 Royden Loewen, *From the Inside Out* (Winnipeg: The University of Manitoba Press, 1999), p. 3.

82 Katie Funk Wiebe, *Alone: A Widow’s Search for Joy* (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers,

Inc., 1976), p. 284.

83 Neufeld Redekop, *Work of Their Hands*, p. 19.

84 Lorraine Roth, *The Amish and Their Neighbours: the German Block, Wilmot Township 1822-1860* (Waterloo, ON: Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario, 1998), p. 55.

85 In articles on “Hochruecken Neuigkeiten” (*Die Steinbach Post*, 1. den 11. Mai, 1942, and 2. den 20. Oktober, 1947), D.D. Ginter makes the following birth announcements, 1. *Bei Franz T. Friesens haben sie ein Maedchen mehr in der Familie*, and 2. *Corn. Warkentins, Rosengart, erfreuen sich einer kleinen Tochter, was Frau Warkentin sich vorige Woche mitbrachte vom Hospital*.

86 James Urry, “Gender, Generation and Social Identity in Russian Mennonite Society”, *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 17, (1999), p. 105.

87 “Even within the community, a woman with a practical nature could still make a very significant contribution. But what about the woman with an exceptional creative talent?” Magdalene Redekop, “Through the Mennonite Looking Glass”, in *Why I am a Mennonite: Essays on Mennonite Identity*, ed. by Harry Loewen (Kitchener, ON: Herald Press, 1988) p. 240.

88 Carol Penner, “Mennonite Women’s History: A Survey”, *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 9, (1991), p. 130.

89 In an article (*The Carillon*, April 12, 2007), Royden Loewen, referring to renaming Steinbach streets, speaks of the “need to resurrect a cultural landscape.”

90 *David* remembers this event clearly. The father of the family was working far away from home during the summer in order to supplement the family’s income. *David*, then twelve years old but now in his eighties,

can still recall with vivid clarity that his mother was lying on the ground and moaning. He is convinced that although she no doubt experienced physical pain, her anguish was due to her anxiety over the possible injury to her eye, and having no adults in the vicinity to provide assistance with numerous small children.

91 Epp, *Women Without Men*, p. 14.

92 I personally clearly recall that these fabrics were turned into everything from undergarments, to linens, to stiffly starched curtains in our summer kitchen

93 My parents had very fond memories of the orchards which were common in their village in Ukraine which produced the finest of fruits, and my eldest sister can still remember the watermelon syrup that was produced in her home from the abundant supply in their garden, even though she was only five years old when she left Ukraine.

94 Maria Campbell, “Kookoom Mariah and The Mennonite Mrs.”, *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 19 (2001), p. 12. “And among those stories [of her people] is the story of Kokoom Mariah’s friend the Mrs., an old Mennonite woman who understood what it was like **to be erased and made invisible.**(my emphasis)”

95 *Ibid.*

96 Julia Kasdorf, “Boundaries and Bodies,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* LXXI (April, 1977 Number two) p. 173.

97 *Martin*.

98 Lorraine Roth, *Willing Service: Stories of Ontario Mennonite Women*, (Waterloo, ON: Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario, 1992) p. xiii.

By Plane and Bush Bike in Bolivia

By Dr. H. Leonard Sawatzky

Reprinted from *Mennonite Mirror* 1(8) (April 1972)

Leonard Sawatzky, a scholar of Mennonites in Mexico and other areas in Latin and South America died in Winnipeg earlier this year. Sawatzky was born in Altona, Manitoba on February 10, 1931 and he died in the Riverview Health Centre in Winnipeg on April 30, 2008. He was predeceased by parents John H. and Elizabeth Sawatzky (nee Penner) of Gnadefeld (Altona). He is survived by his aunt Anne Sawatzky (Frank), his brother Harold (Anne), sister Evelyn, nieces Maryanne, Tonya and Leila and nephews John and Howard.

Leonard obtained his undergraduate degree at the University of Manitoba in 1961 and his Master of Arts degree at UCLA, Berkley in 1963. In 1967 he received his PhD from UCLA, Berkley where he studied under the direction of Dr. Carl Sauer, a distinguished American cultural geographer. Leonard was the last PhD student Dr. Sauer advised. Sawatzky’s major works were his books *They Sought a Country: Mennonite Colonization in Mexico*, Univ. of Cal. Press 1971, and *Sie Suchen Eine Heimat: Deutsch- Mennonitische Kolonisierung in Mexiko 1922-1984*, Marburg 1986. Both were based on his PhD research on Mennonite settlement in Mexico. He taught for 40 years at the University of Manitoba and retired as Associate Professor of Geography in the Department of Environment and Geography. In 1972 he was guest professor at Philips University, Marburg/Lahn, Germany.

Leonard Sawatzky was an important contributor to the study of conservative Mennonites in that he was one of the early scholars to write about the settlement of Mennonites in Mexico. Together with Walter Schmiedehaus and Calvin Wall Redekop, Sawatzky’s, *They Sought a Country*, is a part of the canon of early accounts of Mennonite life in Mexico. The book was widely reviewed and one reader described it as a “first rate job of synthesizing climatic, soil, technological, demographic and other social data into a most informative and readable package.” Throughout his career, Sawatzky tended to cast the settlement of Old Colonists in Mexico and other parts of Latin America in a negative light. That brought him into direct conflict with Delbert Plett and the two squared off in a debate on the subject in the June 2000 issue of *Preservings*.

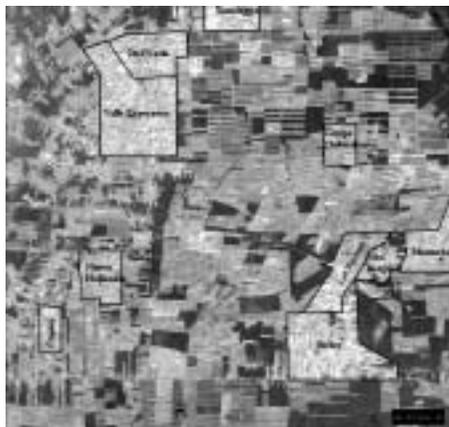
After *They Sought a Country* was published, Sawatzky made a trip to Bolivia, Paraguay and Uruguay before spending the rest of the year at the University of Marburg. He forwarded a daily diary of his impressions and experiences on the Latin American portion of his trip to the *Mennonite Mirror*. The Bolivia portion of his travels is reprinted here as a tribute to the work of H. Leonard Sawatzky.

Tuesday, February 1: The plane to Santa Cruz, Bolivia was the same Electra prop-jet on which I came from Montevideo. It is quite a visual jolt to drone over the

monotonous emptiness of the Gran Chaco for an hour, then suddenly see the neatly laid-out villages of Neuland, Fernheim and Menno stretching mile upon mile to

the horizon, then fly over the same monotonous emptiness for another hour before approaching Santa Cruz. On the way into Santa Cruz the plane passed right over the

Mennonite colonies founded by people from Mexico during the late 1960's. I checked with Dale Linsenmeyer, head of MCC Bolivia. My luck is holding up. I'm to get a motorcycle and I have a place to stay when in Santa Cruz. My first foray into town, for lunch, brought me into touch with 3 kinds of Mennonites—Mexican, Canadian, and Paraguayan—all colonists in Bolivia now. They all appeared glad to talk to this Canadian, and I wasn't the only one asking questions, either. Almost locked horns with one reverend gentleman, formerly from the Altona area. I was talk-



A satellite image showing some of the Bolivian Mennonite Colonies east of Santa Cruz. Photo Credit: NASA.

ing with him about things in general, and asked if anyone, including himself, ever got a little homesick. "No," he said, "this is home now!" Very emphatic! "Well," I suggested, "maybe you'd show me what Bolivian citizenship papers and passports look like?" He didn't have them; he had a Canadian passport. "You get homesick," I said.

Wednesday, February 2: It rained 1 1/2" last night in a spectacular storm and was still drizzling this morning. However, Dale Linsenmeyer wanted to meet some of the English-speaking colonists, so we went out anyway. The gravel road to Cotoca is graded, but the last ten miles are just a pair of water-filled ruts as much as axle-deep. It was the absolute test of motorcycling, I'm sure. The Yamaha bush bike I was riding did its job well. It is light and high and the lug-treaded tires give good traction with little side-slip.

We headed for Guzman, where some 400 Mennonites, 3/4 from Canada, and the rest from the Chaco, live in 5 villages on 7500 acres. They grow corn, sorghum, kaffir, soybeans and grass on farms averaging 50 acres, with an average of 15 acres cleared. The rest is still in heavy bush. It does not appear that the colony will be holding its own economically for some

time. Bulldozing costs about \$70.00 per acre, and can really only be undertaken by those with Canadian capital. Agricultural prices are very low by comparison—milk less than 5 cents a quart, cheese 25 cents or less per pound, but the market is easily flooded. Very few ever have grain to

sell. The only way to sell commodity surpluses is for the individual to peddle them in town at a cost of 1 1/2 to 2 days per working week. There is no central marketing agency such as the Mennonites in Uruguay and Paraguay have.

Thursday February 3: I spent the night with the Gerald Mumaws, MCC teachers in a Bolivian village near Guzman. About 8 people came together last night to talk with me about ways in which they might establish more contact with the English-speaking Mennonites, as they all get pretty lonely out there in the bush, yet the Canadians are only a few miles away. I didn't hold out much hope to them. There is the persistent belief, particularly on the part of the church leaders, that the MCC teachers and technicians were "plants" near the colony in the hope of undermining its unity. Moreover, there is much severe criticism of their dress, hair styles, etc., all of which are serious obstacles to closer contact.

On the colony once more, I was met with a reserve which I can only define as stemming from the colonists' own doubts as to the wisdom of their adventure, and a determination to not disclose their predicament to outsiders. There is much doubt about future prospects, some resentment at the church leaders' attempts to discourage contact even with other Mennonites in the region, but then again much of this is offset with a certain display of bravado and boldly-stated confidence that all will ultimately be well. Tomorrow I plan to go to Tres Palmas and Colonia Canadiense (colonists from the Chaco).

Friday February 4: I made a reconnaissance tour, picking up some contacts and general impressions. I was going to return to Tres Palmas for the night, but I got lost in the maze of trails and wound up following the glow of the city lights back the 35 bumpy kilometers to Santa Cruz. Most of the way I was stuck behind a timber truck which I couldn't pass. The dust just hung there and I nearly gagged.



Transportation in a Bolivian colony in 2008. Photo Credit: Bev Werner.

Saturday February 5: Things don't look very bright at either Tres Palmas or Colonia Canadiense. Tres Palmas, which was founded in 1954 by Russlaender Mennonites from the Chaco, was making good economic progress. Then a cotton company made them a handsome offer for their land and all but three families accepted. They have now gone to Canada and Paraguay. The 300 people from Menno Colony in the Chaco who occupy the four villages of Colonia Canadiense came with little or no capital and, because they had little experience in managing farms or anything else, have made a very limited response to even those opportunities which do exist. The same is generally true of Bergthal Colony, whose 300 people—about 3/4 from the Chaco, the rest, under the leadership of a well-heeled zealot from Canada—are eking out a pretty thin existence.

It's interesting country to drive through. This morning a Nandu, a large ostrich-like bird, raced me for awhile, then crossed the road a few yards ahead of me as though to show contempt for my speed (I was going about 35 mph) and ran off through the high savanna grass. During the heat of the day there are also many lizards, about 18" long, who run with incredible swiftness on their hind legs only. They seem to delight in darting across the road just ahead of your wheels.



The Nandu, also known as the Rhea, is a flightless bird native to South America. Photo Credit: http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/0e/Nandu_1_db.jpg.

Sunday February 6: As I was preparing to retire last night, two enormous cockroaches stood momentarily transfixed in the beam of my flashlight, then skittered under the bed. My host hastened to assure me they were harmless. True, but....

Monday February 7: I had reserved a seat on the plain to La Paz for a 3:00 p.m. flight today, but it was four hours later when it finally left. I felt cheated out of the view of the Andes which I had promised myself. It was only 45 degrees F at the 14,000-foot elevation of La Paz. Both Dale Linsenmeyer, of MCC Bolivia, and I got headaches from oxygen starvation. La Paz itself lies in a canyon on the edge of the Altiplano, and the road winding down provides many striking views.

Tuesday February 8: Archives are hard to get into. Armed guards, body searches, and special passes are all obstacles that take much time to overcome. If something seems odd, they poke a machine pistol at your stomach until it's ironed out. I saw this happen to one fellow who was in too much of a hurry to suit someone. Tonight I invited Dale Linsenmeyer to dinner at the Club Aleman. The Chateaubriand was superb!

Wednesday February 9: Most of the day was spent checking documents, but I did find time to shop for some Bolivian

handicrafts and do a bit of sight-seeing. I took a picture of the bullet-riddled university, which was used as a fortress by Communists during the latest revolution which brought the rightist Col. Banzer to power, over the statue of Simon Bolivar, the Great Liberator. I couldn't resist having dinner at the Club Aleman again.

Thursday, February 10: Today I celebrated my birthday for the first time in summer. The flight from La Paz took us right past the snowy face of Mt. Illimani; 22,000 feet high. I'm sure I got some terrific photos. It was a curious sensation, leaving La Paz in the Electra, to feel the propellers clawing for a grip on the air which wasn't there. We stopped at Cochabamba, about 400 km. north of Santa Cruz. Cochabamba lies in a mountain-walled basin at 8500 feet. The plane had to circle twice to gain enough altitude to climb out and away.

Friday February 11: Today I went out to the Peace River colony near Santa Rosa, about 60 miles NW of Santa Cruz. The colony consists of about 630 persons in 90 families in four villages on 12,500 acres of which they have about 1,000 acres in production after five years. Very few brought much capital to this venture and, one could say, no skills or experience appropriate to the situation. One reason

for leaving Canada was the fact that, with the establishment of consolidated schools and bus service in even the remotest areas of agricultural settlement, it was no longer possible to keep their children out of school. Many are on the edge of economic destitution. Almost all have huge families. Some are being partially supported from the Old Age Pensions of their parents. Others still have a pair of "Canadian jeans" into which they can dip in order to meet the physical needs of existence.

I spoke with several young men, all, although in varying degrees, bitter and disillusioned at having been persuaded by their parents to come here. In Canada, despite their low level of education, they knew the national language and were sought after as laborers in road-building and construction, as well as having the opportunity of homesteading farms of their own in the Peace River country.

The last 30 miles of road were bad. I winched out one truck, then had to do the same for myself when I misjudged a mud-hole in the dark and hung the truck up so all four wheels were pawing the water. The first tree I hitched to came out, roots and all, but the next one held, I'm enjoying this trip. In a few days I will return to Asuncion with a visit to the Chaco.

News

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The main interest is how these 'horse and buggy' Mennonites have resisted and declined the wider world's middle class values of ever increasing wealth, higher education, new technologies and nationalism or patriotism. The remarkable resistance and rapid growth of these conservative Mennonites will be placed in a global context where a far-reaching 'worldly' culture is constantly present.

The underlying principle of the project is to seek to understand a culture that is often misinterpreted and even maligned. The researchers will seek to add voice -- story and historical narrative -- to the startling material images of anti-modernity, such as the horse and buggy, plain dress and simple architecture. They will account for the success of these branches of Anabaptism. And they will introduce Canadians to a hidden dimension of their national history, that is, the 65,000 Canadian-descendent Horse and

Buggy Mennonites scattered throughout the Americas.

The students will also take account for the fact that Ontario's Old Order Mennonites have accomplished their anti-modern culture within the industrial heartland of Canada. The Low German-speaking Old Colony 'Horse and Buggy' Mennonites have done so by seeking greater and greater degrees of isolation, in the far reaches of South America. To enable this comparison the St. Jacob's Workshop introduced team members to local Old Order Mennonites. The researchers visited with schoolteacher Amsy Martin one evening and took supper another night at the home of Esther and Wesley Weber of St. Jacobs. They also heard an historical overview of the Old Order Mennonites from Sam Steiner, retiring archivist of the Mennonite Archives of Ontario.

The students will reassemble in 2011 at the University of Winnipeg, Canada, for an international history conference titled 'Horse and Buggy Mennonites and the Promise of Anti-Modernity.' The project is funded mostly by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) grant of which Royden Loewen is Principal

Investigator. The student researchers include: Anna Sofia Hedberg (Uppsala, Sweden); Kerry Fast (Toronto), Andy Martin (Elmira, Ontario), Jakob Huttner (Berlin, Germany), Anne Kok (Amsterdam), Tina Fehr Kehler (Winkler, Manitoba) and Karen Warkentin (Winnipeg).

The final product of the project, it is hoped, will be an overarching history book of Canadian and Canadian-descendent Horse and Buggy Mennonites.



Gathering around a table inside St. Jacob's historic schoolhouse: are from left to right: Royden Loewen (Winnipeg); Tina Fehr Kehler (Winkler); Kerry Fast (Toronto); Karen Warkentin (Winnipeg); Anna Sofia Hedberg (Uppsala, Sweden); Anne Kok (Amsterdam); Jakob Huttner (Berlin); Andy Martin (Elmira).

Biographies

The Nebraska Roots of the Descendants of George A. Friesen and Elizabeth Ratzlaff

by Berry Friesen

My grandfather, George A. Friesen, was born in Jefferson County, Nebraska, on May 25, 1885, the second son in a family that included five brothers and four sisters (six additional siblings died as infants). George's parents, Gerhard and Helena, were 23 and 21 years of age at his birth and had been married two years. They made their living as farmers on land located seven miles northeast of the county seat of Fairbury. In the Russian style, they lived close to their neighbors—many of whom were relatives—along a common roadway and near a common pasture. They called their community *Heuboden* (hay field), the name of the village from which they had come in Russia.

George's paternal grandfather, Jacob L. Friesen, a twice-widowed man with young children of his own, lived nearby in *Heuboden*. So did George's paternal great-grandparents, Jacob W. and Aganetha Friesen. And so did a paternal great-uncle and great-aunt, Abraham L. and Anna Friesen, who had raised Gerhard from the time in Russia that Gerhard's mother died, probably in childbirth.

My grandmother, Elizabeth Ratzlaff, also was born in Jefferson County, the first born of Heinrich Ratzlaff and Elizabeth Flaming, who had married two years earlier. At the time of young Elizabeth's birth (February 23, 1883), her mother was 22 and her father was nearly 34 years of age with five minor children from his first marriage. Thus, baby Lizzie had both older siblings and the pride of place as her mother's first-born. Later she had younger siblings too; her parents had eleven children after her, all of whom lived to adulthood.

The Ratzlaffs lived in a cluster of farms located two miles north and one mile east of *Heuboden*. Named *Blumenort*, this cluster included a small and informal parent-run school Elizabeth and George attended, although George only through second grade.

None of the buildings erected by the Friesens or the Ratzlaffs stands today. For one visiting the area, the primary visual evidence of *Heuboden* is a grove of trees



Heinrich and Elizabeth (Flaming) Ratzlaff.
Photo Credit: Berry Friesen

standing at the former site of the Jacob L. Friesen residence near Cub Creek and the west section line.

The process of settling in Nebraska

While George and Elizabeth were born in Nebraska, their parents all were born in south Russia and immigrated to North America in July, 1874 as part of larger groups of friends and relatives. The Friesens arrived in New York harbor on the S.S. *Hammonia* on July 17, 1874. Five weeks later, they arrived in Beatrice, the county seat of Gage County and just 20 miles to the east of their final destination. The entire group stayed in Beatrice about one month until temporary buildings had been erected on their newly purchased lands in Jefferson County.

The **Beatrice Express** published this account in its Sept. 10, 1874 edition:

The colony here, which consists of 28 families, comprising about 120 souls, is now busily at work preparing to build on their lands in Jefferson County. . . They will build frame barns this fall, which they



None of the buildings erected by the Friesens or Ratzlaffs stands today. This picture looks east from the west edge of section 18 and across Cub Creek. The visible grove of trees was probably planted around the Jacob L. Friesen residence.

will use for dwellings through the winter, and next season will build substantial dwellings of brick and stone. They bought at St. Joseph (Missouri) about 5,000 feet of lumber, 53 horses, 87 head of oxen, 20 Studebaker wagons and a few other farming implements. The most of their smaller utensils, as well as supplies, they buy of Beatrice merchants. . . . The lands brought by the Russians lie in town three, range three, Jefferson County, and although they have been given a few days more to make their individual selections, the whole tract bargained for amounts to 15,000 acres. This they got for \$3.51 an acre, cash down, which is 40 percent off of the company's (Burlington and Missouri River Rail Road) usual cash rates. The lands, which are south of Cub Creek, have been described to us by residents of Jefferson County as first-class in soil and location. And the Russians themselves are entirely pleased with them. The grasshopper situation does not discourage them in the least, which is a fact American newcomers should consider and ponder upon. They bring some money with them, which helps to make a good start, but they are a hardworking, frugal class, and can manage to live and prosper under circumstances that would seem discouraging to our farmers.

Jefferson County is located along the Nebraska-Kansas border about 80 miles west of the Missouri River. It is part of the prairie ecosystem stretching from Illinois to the Rockies. While sharing common features such as an abundance of grass, few trees and a relatively flat topography, this vast region also includes significant regional differences based on rainfall. The eastern one-third had sufficient moisture (generally 30-40 inches annually) to support big bluestem grasses that in the 19th Century grew "as high as a horse's back". Located along the western edge of this eastern portion Jefferson County typically received 30-32 inches of precipitation annually. For farmers accustomed to the steppes of Russia, this appeared ideal for their kind of agriculture.

During that first winter in Nebraska, the immigrants finalized their land purchases. George's great-grandfather, Jacob W. Friesen, purchased 395 acres in sections 17 and 18 of Cub Creek Precinct for \$1,302. His great uncle, Abraham L. Friesen, purchased 640 acres in those same two sections for around \$2,150. By and large, this was level, well-drained ground with only gentle changes in elevation. Along the western 300 yards of section 18 was a low area through which flowed one of the branches of Cub Creek. It was here they built their homes and barns, perhaps because of the close proximity of water and pastureland for the animals.

Heinrich Ratzlaff was part of a group of immigrants that came from the same part of Russia as the Friesens and arrived in North America on the same date (July 17, 1874). However, this second group traveled on a different ship (the S.S. Austrian) and arrived in a different port (Quebec) because their final destination was Manitoba, Canada.

Strong family and religious ties connected the Manitoba and Nebraska immigrant groups and frequent letters kept the two groups apprised of life in the other location. In 1875, just a year after settling in Manitoba, Heinrich and his immediate family relocated to Jefferson County, Nebraska and started over again. In his diary, he wrote this account of his first days there.

When we arrived June 14, we began from the beginning again . . . After we had visited here one

week, my brother-in-law Klassen accompanied me to Fairbury to buy horses. After much questioning, we went to a farmer named Bondi who was eager to sell. We found 2 horses, one Wallach 3 years and the other 5 years. He sold them to me for \$160 together; then two cows for \$45 together, one buggy, harness, pails and a brush for \$20, a total of \$225. . . . I then bought a large wagon from Greeves, a crop of planted corn and wheat from an Englisher. I also bought potatoes and garden vegetables, altogether 25 acres (of such) for \$50.00. Now we were happy; we already had a harvest in 1875.

Other Manitoba families joined the Ratzlaffs in Nebraska to escape the harsh Manitoba winters. Still others emigrated

from Russia and settled in Nebraska over the next two years. By the end of 1877, around 60 Russian immigrant families were living in Jefferson County. Together, they established seven settlements, all in the Russian pattern of building sites closely situated along a common road and long, rectangular fields stretching behind.

Heinrich purchased his first Nebraska farm land from his uncle, Isaac Harms, on March 21, 1878. It was an 80 acre tract in section 5 of Cub Creek Precinct, included the Creek at its north end, and was conveyed for the below-market price of \$300. The 1880 census provides details about the Ratzlaff farm. The value of the tract (55 acres improved and 25 acres unimproved) was pegged at \$1,100. In addition to the two horses and two cows Heinrich referenced

in his diary entry, Heinrich now owned two head of other cattle, two calves, two pigs and 25 chickens. Altogether, this livestock had a value of \$250. He also owned farm implements having a value of \$135 and an inventory of grain with a value of \$200. On the land Heinrich raised barley (7 acres), Indian corn (7 acres), and wheat (40 acres).

The Friesens, the Ratzlaffs, and the other new settlers who had accompanied them to North America all had their roots in the network of Mennonite congregations in Russia: the *Kleine Gemeinde*. These congregations began in 1812 as a small group of believers who desired the rigorous practice of congregational discipline, no involvement in civil authority structures, and strict nonresistance. Because they found aspects of this lacking in the *Grosse Gemeinde* (especially the practice of consistent discipline), they separated themselves from the larger church and ordained Klaas Reimer as their first leading elder, or *Ältester*. The break-away group never totaled more than 1,500 people among a total Russian Mennonite population in 1870 of perhaps 50,000. Nevertheless, according to those who write history, the group was an anchor point for historic Anabaptism within the Mennonite colonies because of its adherence to traditional teachings and the exemplary lives of its members.

Being a Friesen

Among the *Kleine Gemeinde* immigrants, the Friesen name was more prominent than any other.



The most densely populated area stretched along a road between Rosenort and Rosenhof. Known as Russian lane, this stretch of road later became part of the state highway between Beatrice and Fairbury and the north boundary of the town of Janzen.

Helena von Riesen was the wife of the first *Ältester*; her brother (Abraham Friesen) was the second *Ältester*; and their nephew (Johann Friesen) was the third. During Johann's tenure, the *Kleine Gemeinde* split and Johann's nephew (Abraham L. Friesen) was chosen as *Ältester* of one of the two resulting groups. Abraham L. is generally recognized as the leader of the Russian immigrant families that settled in Jefferson County in 1874.

Moreover, the reason this group chose Nebraska as their North American home was itself related to the Friesen family. Cornelius Jansen, a Prussian Mennonite who had been exiled from Russia by the Czar because of his efforts to promote emigration of the Mennonites to North America, strongly encouraged the group to settle in Nebraska. Because he was married to a Friesen woman, his advice had additional influence with the group led by Abraham L. Friesen. During this same period of time, the Jansen family settled in Beatrice and owned and operated a large sheep ranch just six miles to the east of *Heuboden*.

The *Kleine Gemeinde* meetinghouse was built in *Heuboden* in 1884 on land in the northwest quarter of section 18, just a quarter mile from George's boyhood home. His great-grandparents, Jacob W. and Aganetha Friesen, conveyed the 2-acre site to the Mennonite Church of *Heuboden* for \$25. As previously noted, great uncle Abraham was the lead elder of the congregation. His many activities included the publication of religious materials and regular travel to Manitoba on church business.

These many connections provided a sturdy structure for George's early life and he likely was acquainted with many of the details. Moreover, George's mother also was a Friesen who, like George's father, was a direct descendant of the second *Ältester*. (Yes, George's parents were second cousins.) So George would have received strong *Kleine Gemeinde* teaching from both sides of his family. In 1904, at age 19 years, he was baptized by his great uncle Abraham and became a member of the Mennonite Church of *Heuboden*.

Being a Ratzlaff

Being a Ratzlaff meant something too, although it was related more to Heinrich's personality than to the history of the Ratzlaff family. Heinrich was an energetic, strong-minded individual. In his written description of the emigration experience, he stated that at age 26, "I became the leader of 64 families who undertook the trip" (from south Russia to Manitoba). It is not clear what he meant by "leader"; certainly the

primary leaders of the group were older men who also served as pastors. Heinrich himself provided some explanation: "Many difficulties were connected with this voyage because we passed through many foreign countries. Again and again, the baggage had to be paid for with foreign currency. The exchange of currency became my assignment."

Once in Manitoba, Heinrich played a key role in "spying out the land" and deciding where to settle. Upon making their choice of land on the west side of the Red River, he wrote the following words in German on a dead tree: "It is good to be here, let us build our homes." When setting up their first village, young Heinrich again was given a leadership role. He wrote: "Since I had already been commissioned village mayor in Russia, as well as having served as leader on our trip to America, I was commissioned to serve as leader of the village of *Rosenort*."

As noted, in 1875 Heinrich and his family moved to Nebraska because of the warmer weather and the advantageous growing conditions. Ten years later, in the leadership elections held by the *Kleine Gemeinde*, 37-year-old Heinrich received 34 votes out of 42 cast. Thus, from age two, Lizzie grew up in the home of a minister.

In 1888, Heinrich played a key role in the most serious congregational dispute to impact the *Kleine Gemeinde* during their years in Nebraska. The dispute centered on the behavior of the *Ältester*, Abraham L. Friesen. According to one account, Friesen had purchased a new reaper, the first such piece of equipment in the area. It was common at this time for farmers to borrow and lend equipment. Friesen's reaper was in such great demand that he felt justified in cutting his own grain one Sunday afternoon so that his neighbors could use it sooner. When confronted for working on Sunday, he attempted to justify his behavior as an exercise in "brotherly love". Because Friesen was the *Ältester*, his view prevailed but did not sit well with Heinrich and 38 others who left the *Kleine Gemeinde* and joined another congregation led by Isaac Peters.

The historical record includes a long letter to Heinrich seeking to dissuade him from leaving. The letter references the Sunday reaping and also refers to another matter involving *Ältester* Friesen and a cow. Apparently one of Friesen's cows was stolen or bought and not paid for. Friesen signed a document (probably an affidavit) indicating the cow was his. To his dismay, soon thereafter that affidavit was used as the basis of a court proceeding commenced

against an individual in the community. Friesen was asked to testify in court and several members of the congregation were subpoenaed for jury duty. For a community that had always avoided the coercive power of civil authorities to settle disputes, it was scandalous that an *Ältester* was involved in litigation.

The letter to Heinrich refers to the fact that Friesen had repented of both these matters and had promised there would be no repetition. We do not know how Ratzlaff replied but the desired reconciliation did not occur. Thus, the *Kleine Gemeinde* leadership group ended Heinrich's appointment as a minister. In November, 1889, Heinrich's new congregation, Ebenezer Church, ordained him as one of its ministers.

This was a turning point in the family's history because it meant that Lizzie was raised from age 5 years in a congregation that was not part of the *Kleine Gemeinde*. Thus, when that group left Nebraska a few years later, Lizzie and her husband did not go along.

Congregation and faith community

Worship services among the *Kleine Gemeinde* occurred in private homes or in their school buildings. The services were simple and unadorned and lasted several hours. The group would sing from the *Gesangbuch* with the help of an elected song leader and without musical instruments. The songs themselves spoke of suffering, commitment and future bliss. This was followed by a period of silent congregational prayer when all the members of the group would kneel at their benches. After a lengthy introduction by one of the ministers, another minister or perhaps the *Ältester* would deliver the sermon, which would be read. It was not unusual for the sermon to have been spoken previously by another minister some years before. Extemporaneous preaching was frowned upon as an expression of vanity.

The *Kleine Gemeinde* understood themselves to be part of a righteous remnant that bore witness to the reign of Christ already begun here on earth. This required nonconformity in many respects including plain and simple dress, the avoidance of greed or ostentation, the refusal to use tobacco, the avoidance of drunkenness or the possession of firearms, and honesty in all business practices. To provide guidance on their journey of faith, they looked no further than the Bible, the writings of Menno Simons, *The Martyr's Mirror*, and devotional materials written by Dutch pastors in the 16th and 17th centuries. Their reference points were the early church as described in the Bible and 16th Century Anabaptism.

They fully believed this life of discipleship must be preceded by a genuine inner conversion and commitment of one's life to Jesus Christ. But they emphasized the living of faith, not the coming to faith, and were skeptical of teaching that elevated personal spiritual experiences over the lived experiences of community.

One of their distinctive beliefs was opposition to forms of millennialism that pushed the triumph of Jesus Christ into a future realm. Abraham Friesen, the second *Altester*, wrote this:

We perceive the matter to be terrifying (that some would) take the Kingdom of Peace, which was so dearly purchased for us by the blood of Christ over 1800 years ago, and of which he appointed us as his stewards, and then to remove this Kingdom of Peace so far distant from us. . . . I do not consider myself to be very intelligent but nevertheless I do have knowledge within my heart that the reign of Christ has already found its commencement, and that the time of his (first coming) has already brought the gospels to life in great clarity and power.

This had implications for the way the *Kleine Gemeinde* conducted themselves in relation to government. They took no oaths, refused to cooperate in any way with military service or the raising of funds to support the military, and refused to vote or participate in juries or other forms of civil law enforcement. They resisted government control of education; indeed, one of their reasons for leaving Russia was concern about increased government involvement in their schools.

In summary, the *Kleine Gemeinde* understood salvation to be a narrow and rocky path ascending through life toward heaven, not an exuberant entrance into the banquet hall. Over time, many concluded that this understanding was deficient. Peter M. Friesen, the Mennonite Brethren historian, put it this way: "They never arrived at the joyous understanding of the forgiveness of sins through Jesus Christ." Another frequent criticism was that the *Kleine Gemeinde* lacked "assurance of salvation". While the *Kleine Gemeinde* perceived this to be humility about matters that remain in God's hands, others saw it as troubling evidence that they had not experienced genuine salvation. These criticisms, when combined with a worship style that often failed to warm the heart or lift the spirit, left the group vulnerable to other Christian groups that embraced an effusive, bold and open spirit.

During George and Elizabeth's growing up years, such groups often held special meetings in Jefferson County. Among those seeking converts from the *Kleine Gemeinde* were the Krimmer Brethren from Gnadenau, Kansas, the Holdeman from McPherson, Kansas and the Mennonite Brethren from nearby Henderson. By 1890 all but the Holdeman had established congregations in Jefferson County and two-thirds of the *Kleine Gemeinde* membership had joined these new congregations.

The first such effort (1878) and eventually the most successful was led by Isaac Peters. He was a seasoned pastor who had led a congregation in Russia and had established a new congregation in Henderson, 50 miles to the northwest of Jansen. The *Kleine Gemeinde* respected him because he preached conservative, communal values and nonresistance. But Peters also emphasized an experiential faith through a "change in heart" and worship services marked by extemporaneous preaching, spontaneous prayer and testimonies. This appealed to people, as did the fact that his congregation (known as Peters Church and also as Ebenezer Church) practiced a baptism similar to the *Kleine Gemeinde's* and did not require those who moved their memberships to be rebaptized. In December, 1878, 39 believers joined the Peters group, most from the *Kleine Gemeinde*; as previously noted, nearly 40 more joined in 1888. In 1890, the group was large and well-enough established to build its first meetinghouse, a 20' by 30' structure just west of Jansen.

In 1889, Peters led his Jansen and Henderson congregations into an association with a Mountain Lake congregation to form the *Bruderthaler* conference (later called Defenseless Mennonites of North America and still later the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren). As a conference, these congregations emphasized foreign missions as well as Sunday School, ladies aid, and youth meetings. This is the group Lizzie's family joined when she was five. Some of the Friesens joined this new church too. George's parents did not; they remained a part of the *Kleine Gemeinde* and worshipped in the meeting house in *Heuboden*.

The "English" community

In 1886, three years after Elizabeth's birth and a year after George's birth, Peter Jansen bought 40 acres in one of the Mennonite settlements (*Rosenort*) for the purpose of developing a town immediately adjacent to the planned extension of the Rock Island Railroad. His plan was successful. The line was completed as planned and during the first year, thirteen businesses began

operating in the town including a bank, a pump and windmill business, an implement dealer, a hardware store, a grain elevator, a lumber yard and a hotel. The town of Jansen quickly became the commercial, social and religious focal point of the immigrant settlement of Jefferson County.

As might be expected, this impacted the traditionally-minded *Kleine Gemeinde* in many ways. The town had a different physical structure than their rural villages, it attracted a greater diversity of people and influences and had more distractions and opportunities. For example, although initially Jansen was a "dry" town, it had its first saloon by 1888 and a second by 1892.

How did the English-speaking residents view their German-speaking neighbors? A.V. Pease, a resident of Fairbury, provided one view in this account written around 1925.

They were almost without exception good men who kept their promises and paid their debts. Their church required them to do these things and they obeyed the church mandates. They were good farmers and soon transformed the treeless prairie into a row of homes embowered in trees. They added tremendously to population of Jefferson County. They were devoted to their religious faith and quickly made friends with one who held religious belief. They were not at all reluctant to ask directly about one's religious faith. On more than one occasion I have been asked by some of them. 'What is your communion? Do you love God? What is your church?'. . . . The most of the older generation used a little alcoholic drink in some form but never to excess. They strongly condemned the man who frequented the saloons. When they built their first homes on the prairie, they built the house and barn contiguous, joined by a covered passageway. It made for comfort in doing the chores in all weather. . . . There were mechanics among them for they hired little outside labor. I remember quite well that they built a few of their old country, two-wheeled wagons or carts. . . . They were most excellent farmers and grew the most of their living on the farm. They were eager for pleasant surroundings and at once planted trees and flowers about their homes and along the roadside.

While he obviously admired the immigrants, Pease also noted peculiarities:

It is well-known to all of our citizens that the Russians, as a class, are industrious and able-bodied men with lots of 'filthy

lucre' that they have made by hard work and they dislike very much to part with it. Their mode of asking the price of animals and making bids upon them is very novel, indeed. For instance, one of our citizens offered them a pair of seven-year-old mares, harness and wagon, supposed to be worth about \$425, for \$200. After examining the horses carefully for about an hour, they left and returned with five others, who, after consultation, offered the owner \$125 for the outfit.

Pease described how the English enjoyed teasing their Russian neighbors.

There was standing in front of (the barber shop) a horse saddled and bridled; a Russian walked into the shop and asked for the price. The knight of the razor promptly replied \$10. Off went the Russian for some of his friends, and they made a thorough examination of the animal and concluded that they would give \$6 for him, provided the barber would throw in the saddle and bridle. The horse was worth about \$125!

Country and town living

As noted above in the excerpt from Heinrich's diary, one of the first tasks of the settlers was to grow a crop of potatoes and vegetables. Animals raised on the farm provided the milk, meat and eggs. To support the livestock, the settlers also planted grains (barley, oats and rye). For a cash crop, most put the largest number of acres into wheat, a crop they were familiar with from their experience in Russia. Wheat did well in those early years and farmers prospered. Some of the new settlers had been successful sheep farmers in Russia and this was done with some success in Nebraska too. Similarly, the settlers attempted to replicate their Russian success with silk culture. This involved planting mulberry trees, introducing the silkworm and spinning silk thread. Around 80,000 trees were planted in 1882 and the effort got off to a strong start. However, imports into the United States from East Asia undercut the market and by the 1890s the effort had collapsed.

In part because of abundant rainfall throughout the 1880s, Mennonite farmers shifted acres away from wheat (which did not do well in wet conditions) and toward corn, which could be sold as a cash crop or used to fatten livestock. In 1886, freight rail service became available to the settlers in Jansen and this enhanced their ability to ship corn to eastern markets and livestock to the stockyards in Omaha and St. Joseph, both only about 100 miles away. By the 1890s, the fattening of cattle and hogs had

become a major part of farming operations and corn was by far the dominant crop.

Around the turn of the century, most Mennonites continued to be farmers; in the 1900 census, Cub Creek Township included 120 rural households, 80 of which were Mennonite. Increasingly, however, Mennonite families also lived in town. By 1906, Jansen included 36 stores and shops, many owned by descendants of *Kleine Gemeinde* immigrants. These businesses offered employment opportunities to Mennonite men who didn't own farm land.

The emergence of new Mennonite congregations was a second factor pulling more families toward town living. Except for the *Kleine Gemeinde*, the Mennonite church buildings were in or near town. As noted, the Ebenezer Church built its first house of worship in 1890 at the northeast corner of section 33, just beyond the western edge of Jansen. In 1905-06 the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren constructed a handsome brick church in the southeast corner of section 27, just one-half mile east of Jansen. And in 1906 the Mennonite Brethren also erected a meeting house, this just inside the north town boundary line.

But town life also had its temptations, especially to a people long schooled in the importance of separation from the world. It included easy access to vaudeville shows, movie theaters, saloons and youthful carousing. Where wealth in the country was held in land, in town it showed itself more conspicuously in motorized vehicles and consumer goods. Prospering businessmen began to try their wings. The leading example was John P. Thiessen, son of a *Kleine Gemeinde* minister and a member of the extended Friesen family, who owned the Jansen Lumber Company, served as president of the bank, served in the Nebraska legislature and later as chairman of the local Council for the Defense of America during World War I.

According to the 1900 census, Jansen included 23 Mennonite households (out of a total of 55) engaged in such activities as broom making, cream separating, school teaching, shop-keeping, carpentry and steam engine operation. By the 1910 census, the number of Mennonite families living in town had increased to 37. That census was the high point in Jansen's population as it reached a total of 308 residents. Electricity, street lights, a water tower and a water works came in the decade that followed. But the population began slipping and gradually declined as improved roads and more reliable and powerful vehicles put Fairbury, Beatrice and even Lincoln within relatively easy reach.

George's parents' life together

Helena was the second child of Abraham B. ("Radmacher") Friesen and Helena Kroeker, who died during or soon after giving birth. Besides the death of her mother at birth, Helena's life included many other similarities to the life of her husband, Gerhard. They were second cousins, grew up in the same Russian village, and crossed the Atlantic Ocean on the same boat. When they married on June 10, 1883, we can imagine they already knew each other well.

Eleven months after their wedding, Helena gave birth to their first child, a boy they named Abraham. George was born 12 months later. By then, Gerhard and Helena were getting established as farmers. The previous November, Gerhard acquired 80 acres in section 17 for \$400 from Abraham L. and Anna Friesen, the couple that had raised him. In the spring of 1891, Gerhard sold the tract back to his uncle for \$2,400 and purchased a 160 acre tract in section 18 just to the north of his father's eighty. The price was \$4,480.

In April, 1908, as a consequence of the decision of the *Kleine Gemeinde* to relocate (see below), Gerhard and Helena conveyed their farm to Matthies Matthiessen for \$10,896. Later that summer, they moved to Meade, Kansas to begin farming there. Gerhard was 45 at the time; Helena was 44. They were accompanied to Meade by three of their four married children and their five minor children.

In late 1913, Gerhard, Helena and some of their children moved back to Jansen, only to return to Kansas in 1917, living briefly in Greensburg and Meade before settling in Montezuma where they operated a creamery. On July 3, 1917, Gerhard was rebaptized into the Holdeman Mennonite Church; apparently Helena remained a member of the *Kleine Gemeinde* until her death. Gerhard died in Dodge City hospital in 1930 at age 67; Helena died later that same year in Jansen at age 66.

The *Kleine Gemeinde* move to Kansas

The factors that made Jefferson County economically attractive to the *Kleine Gemeinde* (good soil, adequate rainfall, proximity to markets) also attracted others. Throughout the 1880s, the County's lands continued to fill with settlers. This meant less land for inexpensive purchase by the *Kleine Gemeinde*, who needed continual expansion if their children were to continue the traditional farming life. Under the pressure of a growing population and rising prices, farms became smaller. In 1880 the average acreage per farm among the *Kleine Gemeinde* was 208; by 1900,

the average had decreased to 133 and an increasing number of families owned no land at all.

Faced with a shortage of inexpensive land, as well as concerns about the attractiveness of evangelical churches and worldly town influences, the *Kleine Gemeinde* once again began to consider relocation. Small groups of families moved to Colorado, California, Texas and Saskatchewan but several of those efforts ended in failure. After a period of discernment and prayer, the entire congregation voted (90 percent in favor) to relocate together to a place where land was more plentiful and inexpensive. They seriously considered a site in Saskatchewan but eventually agreed on an area southeast of Meade, Kansas. In September, 1906, after selling their lands and packing their furnishings and equipment in railroad cars, the first members of the congregation relocated. The largest contingent joined them in 1907 and a few more in 1908. There, in the arid isolation of western Kansas, the group started over again.

The move to Kansas highlighted some of the best qualities of the *Kleine Gemeinde*, including the willingness of the more prosperous to sacrifice so that the landless could gain access to farms. The move also seemed to bring a new spirit of unity and soon after their arrival in Kansas, the congregation built a new meetinghouse. Throughout the '20s and '30s, membership gradually grew, reaching 199 in 1939. However, in the early '40s, a repetition of the earlier divisiveness began to unfold. Questions were raised about the *aeltester* and more and more members began attending the local *Bruderthaler* congregation. In 1943, a petition was circulated proposing to place the congregation under the authority of the *Bruderthaler*. It received strong support. Thus, the nearly 70-year history of the *Kleine Gemeinde* in the United States ended.

The reorganized congregation renamed itself Emmanuel Mennonite Church. A few years later, just after the end of World War II, it made its first commitment to provide full financial support for a missionary couple serving overseas. That couple was Esther Friesen and Klaas Kroeker from Jansen, daughter and son-in-law of George and Elizabeth Friesen.

George's and Elizabeth's life together in Nebraska

George and Elizabeth married on March 29, 1906. The wedding occurred at Ebenezer Church where Elizabeth's father, Heinrich, was pastor. He led the couple through their wedding vows, which

included spoken prayers by the bride and groom. For George, it was his first experience praying aloud.

Based on the plat map from 1900, it appears that Gerhard Friesen farmed 160 acres in section 18 at the time of George and Elizabeth's marriage. Abraham L. Friesen farmed 240 acres in the same section. As George and Elizabeth's only surviving child (Esther) remembers the story, her parents began their life together on a farm. Based on a hand-drawn map from the Heinrich Ratzlaff Reunion of 1977, George and Elizabeth's first residence may have been on a rented tract just west of the Abraham L. Friesen farm and one-half mile south of Gerhard and Helena.

If so, their time there was short—two years at most. For while George and Elizabeth were planning their wedding and then setting up their first home, the *Kleine Gemeinde* were in the process of selling their lands and relocating to Kansas. Abraham L. Friesen, as leader of the group, blessed that decision. Gerhard, who from birth had been so much a part of Abraham's family, joined in.

The departure of the *Kleine Gemeinde* significantly diminished George and Elizabeth's economic prospects. This isn't to suggest that George and Elizabeth were left without resources. The Ratzlaff family was nearby and a continuing source of help. George had a talent for mechanical repairs and could expect to parlay that into a living. Nevertheless, he and Elizabeth no longer had a land base and no longer had easy access to animal power, breeding stock, farm equipment, volunteer labor, and inexpensive capital. Instead, the American style of independence and self-reliance became their path. As the years unfolded

and the contingencies of life took their toll, George and Elizabeth's separation from the economic support of the *Kleine Gemeinde* took a heavy toll.

Henry, their first child, came into the world in January 1907, just ten months after their marriage. Peter arrived in January 1908 and Helena (Lena) in June 1909. Although we know very little about these years, the 1910 Census documents George, Lizzie, Henry, Pete and Lena lived together in the village of Jansen on April 30, 1910. George was identified as a farm laborer. Neighbors were identified by the following occupations: cream tester, teacher, flour packer, bar keeper, carpenter, jeweler, telephone lineman, railroad laborer, and general laborer.

By the time Herman was born in December 1911, the family was living on a 4-to-5 acre plot along graveled U.S. highway 136 in the far northeast corner of Jansen. George bought this property from his brother and sister-in-law, Abraham and Aganetha, for \$1,000 on March 27, 1911. The house still stands today. A factor in their decision to move to Jansen (in addition to the departure of the extended Friesen family) may have been the relocation in early 1909 of Elizabeth's parents to a farm just northeast of Jansen in section 23.

During at least five years after the 1908 departure of George's extended family, we can assume he worked for wages. Around Christmas 1913, most of his extended family moved back to Jansen. In anticipation of the opportunity to join forces, George and Abraham purchased a commercial property located on lot 7 in Block 3 of Jansen for \$725. We do not know what they did with it; we do know they sold it again in June 1914 for \$800. A year later, during the summer



A 2007 photo of the home in which George and Elizabeth Friesen lived when Herman was born in December 1911. Photo Credit: Berry Friesen.

of 1915, George and Elizabeth sold their tract outside of Jansen to Albert W. Hinz for \$2,000 and purchased lots 3,5,6,7 and 8 in Block 1 near the eastern edge of Jansen for \$2,000. We can safely assume the family lived in a house on one of the lots. Daughter Esther recalls that George and Abraham operated a mechanical repair shop during the years before and during World War I; perhaps they utilized a shed on one of those lots as their place of business.

Although we know few of the details, we can be fairly certain that George experienced a degree of financial success during those years. Evidence of this is found in his 1918 sale of the town lots for \$1,000 and the purchase of 160 acres of farmland four miles north of Fairbury from Linza E. and Bertha C. Axtell. The purchase price was \$11,200 to the Axtells plus the assumption of the remaining balance (unspecified) on a \$3,000 mortgage. George and Elizabeth paid \$5,000 down and financed the \$6,200 balance with a purchase money mortgage back to the Axtells. It called for payments to the Axtells of \$500 in April 1919 and April 1920; \$1,000 in April 1921 and April 1922; and \$3,200 in April 1923.

The births of Clarence in 1914 and John in 1918 grew the family to six children by the time they occupied their new home north of Fairbury. While living there, Esther and Jacob (Jack) were born (in 1920 and 1922 respectively) and Elizabeth's father, Heinrich Ratzlaff, died (1922). We can imagine some of the children went to school in Fairbury. Alas, there is little to confirm the details of this important time in their lives. What we do know is that on September 23, 1923, George and Elizabeth conveyed the farm back to Linza Axtell for \$796.52. Apparently, they had been unable to make the \$3,200 payment due earlier that year. The farm was lost and their investment gone.

During the spring of 1924, George leased a 320 acre farm along the west half of section 28, one mile west of Jansen. The lease term was one year and the rent was two-fifths of the corn, one-third of the small grain, and \$200 for the pasture. The tract included a large house and barn. Apparently the lease was renewed four times, making five years in all. As daughter Esther recalls, her father farmed and operated a forge where he hammered out plow-shares and made mechanical repairs. He also worked as a mechanic for the huge steam-driven farm machines used by the farmers to thresh their grain.

Esther also fondly remembers this as the home "where all of us kids grew up together." The younger children attended



The Mennonite Brethren Church in Jansen, Nebraska, ca 1936. Photo credit: Berry Friesen.

Grandy School, just a mile further west down the road. While living there, Clarence died in 1926 at age 12 from a mastoid infection and Lena married Andrew Ens in 1928. That marriage prompted a memorable celebration including the construction at the farm of an outdoor stage for music and the stringing of electric lights to illuminate the night-time festivities.

During these years, the older children made important decisions regarding their church affiliations. In the summer of 1925, 18-year-old Henry was baptized into the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren (KMB) congregation, a group that locally had merged with the Mennonite Brethren a few years earlier. Pete and Lena were baptized that same summer by the KMB and Herman in the summer of 1926. These probably were their first baptisms although we can not be sure of that. The KMBs and MBs recognized only immersion and a transfer from Ebenezer Church would have involved a second baptism.



Elizabeth and George surrounded by their children: Herman, Lena, Esther, Jack, John, Pete and Henry, ca. 1930. Photo credit: Berry Friesen.

In the spring of 1929, the family moved to another rented farm just south across the road and one-half mile further east. George,

Elizabeth and their younger children lived there for three years. By this time the older children were on their own -- Lena married and Henry, Pete and Herman working and patching together living arrangements of their own. For the younger children, this short move meant a change of schools -- from Grandy to the school in Jansen. Esther remembers these years included a tornado on June 19, 1929. It blew the roof from one of the sheds into a wheat field and dislodged the nearby Ebenezer Church from its foundation. No one in the family was injured. Esther recalls that her father's late-model car, parked in the damaged shed, was left unharmed but with a 2 X 4 sticking through a rolled-down window.

The winter of 1932 brought yet another move, this one into Jansen near the place where the family had lived twenty years earlier. This enabled George and Elizabeth to again become owners of farm land. By deed dated January 13, 1932, Albert J. and Elizabeth Thiessen conveyed 80 acres running north and south through the middle of section 27 plus an additional 9.5 acres just south of the graveled highway. The purchase price was \$7,100 plus assumption of a mortgage to the Federal Land Bank of Omaha with an unpaid balance of \$5,136. This residence appeared on the 1900 plat of Jansen as the middle of three houses along the north edge of the town and is still in use today. In addition to farming, George managed aspects of the local creamery operation, include milk delivery. Esther recalls she and her older brother, John, often worked there, washing bottles and filling them with milk. John was permitted to use a motorized vehicle to make deliveries, an activity he thoroughly enjoyed.

As noted earlier, beginning midway through the 1920s, the older children affiliated with the combined Krimmer

Mennonite Brethren/Mennonite Brethren congregation. They were excited by their experiences there and shared that excitement with the extended family. Gradually, George and Elizabeth followed their older children in affiliating themselves with the group that met in the attractive brick meetinghouse and had come to carry primarily a Mennonite Brethren affiliation. When John was baptized at age 14 in June, 1933, his parents—now 48 and 50 years old—were rebaptized and the three became members of the congregation together. Thus, a family that had joined with the *Kleine Gemeinde* for 88 years and then with the *Bruderthaler* for 27 years shifted its identity to the Mennonite Brethren.

Leaving Nebraska

The stock market crash of 1929 had little immediate impact in Nebraska where investments tended toward tangible assets. But as the financial woes of the financial class deepened, access to capital became more limited and thus more expensive. This began to ripple across the United States, eventually causing many small rural banks to fail. Without access to capital, business began contracting and the Great Depression began.

Throughout the years after the migration of the *Kleine Gemeinde* to Meade, George and Elizabeth struggled to achieve a measure of financial stability and security. They started a small business in Jansen, farmed at three locations, and occupied at least five different residences. In 1932, with the recent purchase of a small farm and a wage-paying job at the creamery to supplement the farm income, George and Elizabeth prepared to endure the economic storm.

And then came the drought. Over the years that the Friesen family had lived in Nebraska, rainfall tended to average 30-35 inches annually. Occasionally it would dip down to 25 inches for a year but then would bounce back in the following years. During the ten years from 1931 through 1940, annual rainfall was below average in eight years; in '34, '36, '37, '39 and '40, the deficits were severe with annual totals of around 20 inches.

With crops withering in the field and credit unavailable from the banks, farmers and businesses began to fail. Esther's husband, Klaas Kroeker, recalled:

Everyone was broke. We had nothing because of the depression and the drought. Nearly everyone left. The MB Church in Jansen closed as nearly all of its members were gone. We could live there with



A four generation picture. Laverna with her mother Lena (Friesen) Enns to her right, grandmother Lizzie and great grandmother Elizabeth. Photo credit: Berry Friesen.

government help but there was no future, no identity in that.

Pete was the first to leave. He had attended Tabor College for a time in 1930 and had met Emma Wiebe, a Minnesota girl. They married during March, 1931. After setting up house near Jansen, Pete tried his hand at farming, worked for a while at local feed delivery, and then acquired a job in Fairbury doing over-the-road trucking to Lincoln and Beatrice. During a 1934 trip to Minnesota with their first child, Norman, all three became ill with an unknown infection. They were quarantined upon their return to Nebraska and little Norman died in his parents' arms on January 14th, 1935. Shortly after, Pete lost his job in Fairbury because the business failed. During a brief trip to Minnesota to see Emma's parents that spring, they heard a small grocery store in Delft was for sale. With \$500 in borrowed money, they made the down payment and got into the grocery business.

Henry married Louise Brandt, a Jansen girl, in September 1931 at the Mennonite Brethren Church. They lived in Fairbury the first five years of their married life. Henry worked in the grocery business and did long-distance trucking into Chicago. In search of better job opportunities, they left Jansen in 1936 and moved to Reedley, California where many other Mennonite families from Nebraska had already settled, including Louise's sister and brother-in-law, Tina and Jake Ratzlaff. Henry's first job in the Reedley area was chopping cotton for a Mennonite farmer. After only a short time, he was offered a job at the Justesen Food Store where he worked for eight years. In 1945, Henry began working at Reedley Hardware. Later he and Louise went into partnership with others and eventually purchased the business outright.

Lena and Andy also made their move in 1936 in search of work that would better provide for their growing family. The Enses moved to Bellingham, Washington where they joined Andy's parents and some Ratzlaff relatives. Andy renovated old houses and worked on a dairy farm. In 1938 the family moved to Reedley, California for summer fruit work; later that fall they traveled to Minnesota where they hoped to lease a farm. They lived in Delft nearly a year and Andy did carpentry and other work for Pete and others in the area. When the farming opportunity did not materialize, the family returned to Jansen in the fall of 1939 and gave farming in Nebraska another try. During the early '40s, rainfall and business conditions improved. However, because of the exodus of so many, membership in the Jansen Mennonite Brethren Church had dwindled to just a few families. In 1947, out of concern for their older children who were approaching dating age, the family packed up again and moved permanently to Reedley.

Herman married a local girl, Susan Buller, in March, 1935. He worked for area farmers, some as far away as Culbertson in western Nebraska. Their first child was born in Fairbury in November, 1936. By 1938, they had run out of options in Nebraska and so moved to Delft where Pete helped them get a new start. Herman operated a filling station on the same street as Pete and Emma's grocery store. Early in 1942, the family moved to California where they settled in Reedley. Herman owned and operated a Texaco filling station and auto repair shop there for many years.

With Pete in Minnesota, that location became an attractive option to young John. Done with school at 14 and eager to make his way in the world, John went to Minnesota already in the summer of 1935 when he



The Friesen clan, ca 1935. Photo credit: Berry Friesen.

was only 16. He lived in Pete and Emma's attic and found work with a local farmer. During his short stay in Minnesota before returning to Jansen, he met Blondina Wiens (Blanche). They exchanged letters over the winter. During each of the following summers, John returned to Delft to work on area farms and court Blanche. They married in September, 1939 and established their home in Mountain Lake. After a series of town jobs, John began farming in the spring of 1942 northeast of Delft.

With older siblings living in or around Delft, Esther had many opportunities to get acquainted with Minnesota. But it was a western Nebraska acquaintance she made through Herman that helped her get started on life's path. The man, a student at St. Paul Bible College, learned of Esther's desire to become trained for international missions and told her St. Paul Bible College had an excellent program. Esther was persuaded and enrolled in September, 1939. In June, 1941 she married a Jansen man, Klaas Kroeker, in a ceremony at the Mennonite Brethren country church near Delft. After they completed their training, a congregation in Stickney, South Dakota, called Klaas to be their pastor. He was ordained by Ebenezer Church in the summer of 1943 and served the Stickney congregation for two years. In 1946, Esther and Klaas began serving as missionaries in Mali with the support of the *Bruderthaler* congregation from Meade.

Jack, the youngest member of the family, made his exit from Nebraska in May, 1940 at age 18. As John had lived in the home of his older brother, Pete, while getting started, so Jack lived in John's home

in Mountain Lake and found work with local employers. Jack worked in the area until September, 1941, when he moved to Reedley to take a grocery store job that Henry had lined up for him there. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor occurred in December of that year and Jack soon was inducted into the armed forces. He served as a medical corpsman during the war and then returned to the grocery business. He married Betty Coker in May, 1947.

The end of the Nebraska years for George and Elizabeth came in 1939 as they lost their residence and farm due to a default in the mortgage to the Federal Land Bank of Omaha. Out of farming for the first time since 1918, George began operating a filling station at the southwest corner of Jansen. He continued there until perhaps the spring of 1941 when he and Elizabeth moved to Mountain Lake. There George made a living by operating a filling station at the east edge of town.

For perhaps six months in 1941, the Delft and Mountain Lake area was a gathering point for the Friesen family as George and Elizabeth, Pete, Herman, John, Esther and Jack all resided there. But in September, Jack moved to Reedley and by spring of 1942, Herman with his wife Susan did the same. That left three of the children in Minnesota, three in California and one back in Jansen.

George was not happy in Mountain Lake; the cold winter weather, the absence of life-long friends and community standing, and his and Elizabeth's poor financial prospects all played a part. In February, 1944, after three years in Mountain Lake, they sold most of their belongings at a

public sale and moved to California. There George did janitorial work in a private school. Elizabeth died in Reedley on May 12, 1948 at age 65; George died in Fresno on May 27, 1954 at age 69.

Postscript

In the following quotation, poet Frederick Turner reminds us of the importance of respecting the past.

If we only heed it, all the past is open to us, with its perilous seas and faerie lands forlorn, and we are free to set sail anytime we want. Our cultural myth is one of liberation, of the present breaking the shackles of the past. But what if it is the past that breaks the shackles of the present?

What must the explorer of the past give in return for his or her liberation? The doorway, like the one that leads into the garden in Alice in Wonderland, or like the entrance to a Japanese teahouse, is low and requires certain sacrifices: one must make oneself small and leave one's sword outside. A poet or artist who makes the journey must abandon the claim to originality and the hope of political vindication. Whatever is brought back must be attributed to its proper source, and the artist can demand payment only for the trouble of making the journey, not for the gift itself. One must acknowledge oneself to be a latecomer, a follower, a singer of tales composed by the dead.

During the ten years my brothers or I attended Tabor College, I recall perhaps thirty trips from our farm near Delft to Hillsboro, Kansas. That journey took us south through Nebraska toward Highway 15, which eventually would lead us to Tabor. We could have intersected Highway 15 in Fairbury. But that route, taking us through Jansen, would have made the trip to Hillsboro twelve miles longer. And so we rarely drove through the place where our story began—only once that I recall out of those many trips.

Now, this strikes me as exceedingly odd. Apparently my immediate family perceived the Nebraska part of our story to be unimportant at best or a shackle at worst. We certainly did not see it as a source of our liberation. Where did this attitude come from?

First, perhaps we felt some shame—or at least ambivalence—about the years before we became Mennonite Brethren. When we evangelicals bear witness to our faith, we speak of the darkness in which we lived

before we came to the light. That rhetorical template, while expressing what many have experienced, can be dismissive of all that occurred before the awakening. Were our *Kleine Gemeinde* ancestors stiff-necked legalists who knew nothing of the grace of God? If so, perhaps they are best forgotten.

Or perhaps we felt some embarrassment about Grandpa's economic failures. He and Grandma struggled financially, losing two farms. In his later years he worked for wages at low-paying jobs and was unhappy with his prospects. Perhaps we thought his story included too much failure.

Then again, whatever feelings we may have had about our family's history, perhaps we simply regarded that story to be irrelevant to the modern lives we were living. Maybe we were not convinced, in other words, that the past was a potential source of treasure.

If we were to reexamine our mixed feelings and to reconsider what the past has to offer our family, Turner says we will need to make ourselves small, leave our swords outside and abandon any claim to originality. We would, in other words, need to approach our history with humility.

Take the *Kleine Gemeinde* part of our story, for instance. They tried to construct a way of life for their children that honored God and witnessed to Jesus Christ as LORD of all the earth. Toward that end, they lived close to the land and within communities of accountability. They acted very deliberately to protect their children from influences that would erode this way of life: secular education, immoral practices, and the intrusion of politics and government (including the military) into their families and congregations. When their way of life was in peril, they moved to another location and started over.

Don't we have the same goal for our children as they did? If so, we need to pay attention to their story and how they

approached the task of shaping a life for their children.

As I perceive it, we have been adept at correcting their mistakes. We seem to embrace the grace of God more enthusiastically. We are less clannish and engage new neighbors more warmly. We are more confident that God is at work in people and experiences that are outside our zones of comfort.

Perhaps we need to consider the possibility that the *Kleine Gemeinde* were more perceptive than we in their recognition of the power of political, cultural and economic structures to empty our story of meaning and leave us unprepared for the rigors of life. In their search for wisdom in the living of their days, they first looked backward, to their history and the evidence of God's presence in it. We, ever determined to be new and innovative, too readily eschew the past and try to look ahead. Psalm 145 suggests they had this part of it right:

One generation will commend your works to another; they will tell of your mighty acts. They will speak of the glorious splendor of your majesty, and I will meditate on your wonderful works. They will tell of the power of your awesome works, and I will proclaim your great deeds. They will celebrate your abundant goodness and joyfully sing of your righteousness. . . . They will tell of the glory of your kingdom and speak of your might, so that all men may know of your mighty acts and the glorious splendor of your kingdom. Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures through all generations.

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The Hildebrand Story

by Marjorie Hildebrand

Forefathers move from Holland to Prussia

Christoph Lehn was born in Holland in 1679. On October 1, 1706 he married Elizabeth Steffern, born in 1680. When he was 33 years old he was baptized in the Amsterdam Mennonite Church. The Lehn Diary indicates that his baptism certificate

is to be found in the Danzig Mennonite Church in Prussia.¹ This shows that he and his family eventually moved to Prussia from Holland. Persecution had caused many Dutch Anabaptists to settle in the Vistula Delta in Prussia (now Poland), as there was more religious tolerance in the free city of Danzig. They were welcomed here for

their farming and irrigation skill. "Because of this, and because it was easy to follow the trade routes by water from Amsterdam to Danzig, many Mennonites and other Dutchmen came to the Vistula Delta in the 1530s and after."² Here they were able to stay for over 200 years. This is also where they picked up the Low German dialect

which we speak today. The language used in their worship services in the early years was Dutch. Because the worship service in Danzig and surrounding rural churches were originally held in the Dutch language, so also are the writings of Christoph Lehn.³

Christoph and Elisabeth Lehn had a family of eight children, Christoph (1727-91), Margaretha (1729-29), Maria (1731-1789), Elisabeth (1735-1802), Katarina (1738-1814), Anna (1740-44), Jacob (1743-), Hans (1746-46). The Lehn Diary has the following note of interest regarding Katarina's death. "She died on March 1, 1814 during the armistice at Danzig. During the famine that took place at this stage of this truce, she and her son fled into the interior. One mile from Danzig she succumbed to her misery and died. She was 76 years old."⁴ Maria Lehn married Peter Doell of Schidlitz, Danzig Gemeinde. This couple became the parents of a son Peter on October 20, 1760.⁵ He was baptized in 1787, probably in Danzig. Young Peter married Anna Kasdorf on May 1, 1788. She was born May 30, 1766, the daughter of Isaac Kasdorf (b.1735) and Anna Toews (b.1742).⁶ These names are also recorded in Gerhard Hildebrand's family register, thus giving assurance that they are in the correct lineage.

By 1788 there was great unrest within the settlement. Prussia was pressuring the Mennonites, as they were called by now, to support the military. This they were unwilling to do because they believed Christ taught us to love our enemies, not kill them. As a means of pressure the Prussian government did not allow them to buy more land for new families. As a result many became the landless poor (Anwohner). Farming was their way of life. What should they do now?

Catherine the Great of Russia needed farmers to work the soil in the Ukraine. She invited the Mennonites to come and they accepted the invitation. The first to go were the very poor Anwohner. Their move in the fall of 1788 was with great difficulty and hardship. The 228 families were forced to stay the winter in Dubrovna and that was not a happy situation. They planned to settle in the southern Ukraine, but with wars going on along the border they had no choice but to settle farther north along the Dnieper River. "Great was the disappointment of the weary colonists, when upon arrival at Chortitza in July 1789, they first sighted the bare and hilly waste that was to be their new home, their promised land."⁷ This new settlement was called the Chortitza Colony. When other colonies were founded this first one was often referred to as the Old Colony.

Forefathers in Russia

The Mennonites who emigrated from West Prussia to South Russia in 1788-89 settled in villages near the river, with each village having one main street and farmyards on either side. Their farms surrounded the villages. They founded nine such communities, Chortitza, Rosenthal, Insel Chortitza, Kronsweide, Einlage, Schönwiese, Neuendorf, Neuenburg and Schönhorst. Neuenburg, one of the smallest villages, was situated in the northern part of the Old Colony. This is where the Doells and Hildebrands settled when they moved from West Prussia to south Russia. The following notes, translated from German into English from a diary of a certain Bishop Cornelius Warkentin, attest to the fact that the ties to Prussia were still very strong. These new settlers in Chortitza needed spiritual help, which the bishop gave them.

On March 14, 1794 the Honorable Bishop Cornelius Warkentin together with the Honorable Bishop Cornelius Regehr from Rosenort West Prussia traveled to visit the Mennonite churches in Chortitza South Russia. After Bishop Regehr became sick there and died, Warkentin had to go on alone to bring order to the confused disorganized churches there. For that he received a gold medallion from the Russian Emperor Alexander, after he arrived back home. The medallion had an engraved bust picture of the emperor with these words, By God's Grace Alexander I Emperor and Ruler of all Russia. On the other side these words were engraved, For the service rendered to the Mennonite Bishops, Warkentin.

Continuation of the diary.

"On June 15 Holy Communion was served to 233 members in Chortitza. The message was on Psalm 111 with the text being I Cor. 11:23. I received the message from the Lord. On the 19th Holy Communion was served in Neuendorf with 173 members present and on the 20th the preparatory message was given in Kronsweide. A young man who was ill was being baptized there. Many tears were shed. On the 22nd Holy Communion was celebrated, which had not been held there for five years.

On the 23rd due to various circumstances during the Chortitza brotherhood meeting, two men from the Frisian Church were transferred to this church, Cornelius Janzen and Peter Schmidt. In Neuenburg Peter Dueck was unanimously voted in as teacher.

On the 24th they had elections for a school teacher in Chortitza and two men

were elected, David Giesbrecht and Gerhard Enns. After this item of business two women from the Frisian Church were accepted as members. On the 25th I preached in Kronsweide. Even though the meeting was only to have elections for a minister, the people had gathered with the hope that I would also preach. So I spoke on Luke 19:10 about the great love of God for mankind. After the message Heinrich Arndt, Franz Banman and Kornelius von Riesen were elected as ministers. A deacon was also elected.

On the following Sunday I took leave of this church, when everyone began weeping. On the 29 I had my farewell message in Chortitza where a very large crowd, as well as the director, had gathered. This was a very emotional meeting. The following week I spoke twice in Neuenburg and the next time in Schoenhorst at a big gathering. At this meeting many things were shared and enjoyed.

At last on Sunday, July 8 Jakob Wiebe preached and I had a short closing message on Galatians 6:17. Emotion ran so high that I had to stop, for my heart was so sorrowful I had to stop preaching. The weeping of the listeners took control. The farewell from my beloved listeners was so moving.

The First Generation of Hildebrands in Russia

The first Hildebrands that can be traced are Bernhard and Sarah Harder Hildebrand of Prussia, but no dates are available. Their son, Bernhard (I) was born March 4, 1795 in the village of Rosenort, Prussia. He later married Susanna Krahn, born on January 15, 1796. They moved from Rosenort, Prussia to Russia in 1817. This was 29 years after the first group had left, giving the Mennonites opportunity to settle down and thus they were able to give a hand to the newcomers upon their arrival.

Bernhard (I) and Susanna (Krahn) Hildebrand were a young married couple when they left Prussia to settle in Neuenburg, the smallest of the Old Colony villages in Russia. He was 22 and she was 21 years old. They had a small baby born just before they moved. His name was Bernhard (II) born March 18, 1818. They arrived on April 2, 1818 together with Susanna's mother Aganethe Krahn and brother Daniel Krahn and settled in a village called Neuenburg, in the northern part of The Chortitza Colony.⁸ They had 12 children born to them. Susanna became blind in 1843 at the age of 44. This happened during the Easter season after a severe headache.⁹

Bernhard (I) died January 23, 1874 and Susanna on June 21, 1875. Both reached

the age of 79 years, passing away within a year and a half of each other. These two years, 1874-75, were the beginning of the Mennonite immigration to North America.

The Second Generation of Hildebrands in Russia

Bernhard (II) married Agata Krahn, daughter of George & Agata Friesen Krahn, on June 19, 1818.

Many Old Colony Mennonite farmers owned sheep. After having them penned up all winter, their wool would be very dirty. To clean them, the custom was to herd them into the Dnieper River, allowing the fast-flowing water of the river to wash the wool.¹⁰ One spring day Bernhard was busy taking care of a flock of sheep, driving them into the river. Something happened that he lost control and the water swept him away to his death. It was March 10, 1840. He was 22 years old, and was leaving his pregnant wife who gave birth to a son named Bernhard (III) born four months later on July 19, 1840.

Agata then married Franz Loewen and had a family with him, one a daughter Sara born March 18, 1848 and a son Franz born October 25, 1852.¹¹ Agata's second husband predeceased her on June 22, 1865 and she later married Gerhard Penner. She lived to be 71 years, 8 months, passing away on February 18, 1890 at 7:00 p.m., after 14 days of illness. Her son Bernhard (III) moved to Canada twelve years prior to her death. This separation must have been most difficult for mother and son.

The Third Generation - from Russia to Canada

In the spring of 1861, when he was 21, Bernhard (III) was baptized by Rev. Gerhard Dyck and joined the Chortitza Mennonite Church. On December 10, 1861 he married Katharina Doell, daughter of Heinrich & Maria Doell, most likely also from Neuenburg.¹² Heinrich was the son of Peter Doell and Anna Kasdorf.

Their first child Maria was born after ten months of marriage but died at 10 months on October 15, 1863, just two months before their second child, Bernhard was born. This baby did not make it either. A rough start for the young couple. However, within the next 11 years they had seven healthy boys.

Bernhard (III) was a woodworker, making wagons. He was a well-liked man in his village and in time became the Oberschulzte or mayor of Neuenburg. His responsibility, together with other prominent men, was to see that order was maintained. They drew up simple rules and regulations for

their village and were expected to enforce them throughout the village. When it happened that some of the older boys broke the village law, they had to appear before the council who decided what their punishment would be. The mayor had the responsibility to see that the punishment, generally a certain number of strokes with a whip, was properly given. The village shepherd had to do the whipping under the supervision of the mayor.¹³

A story was told that in one instance two boys were very afraid of the whipping that was their due. They begged Mayor Bernhard (III) for extra work instead and were willing to turn the lathe for him. This was a job he needed help with while making wheel hubs for wagons. They were allowed to do this work instead of getting a whipping and promised to obey the village laws in the future.¹⁴

When in 1870-72 the Russian government showed its intention of enforcing compulsory military service, a dark cloud loomed over the Hildebrand household. It could mean sending seven sons off to war. By 1873 serious steps were taken to immigrate to North America. Most of the families who emigrated from the Old Colony did so from 1874-76. There seems to have been real hesitation on Bernhard and Katharina's part, for they only left in 1878. Katharina's father Heinrich Doell passed away in March 1875, leaving her mother Maria alone. The final decision was to take her with them but

Agata, Bernhard's mother stayed in Russia till her death February 18, 1890. Her children by her second marriage to Franz Loewen also immigrated to Canada, Sara & Abraham Hiebert in 1874 and Franz & Margareta Loewen in 1877.

In 1873 Mennonite leaders from Russia were sent to North America to spy out the land. They toured Nebraska and south as far as Texas. They had agreed to visit Manitoba as well. The delegates from Bergthal chose Manitoba as the place to settle because Elder Wiebe was prejudiced in favor of a country under the rule of a British monarch rather than a country with a republican form of government.

The year 1874 saw nine ship loads of Mennonites leave Russia for North America. Most of them were Kleine Gemeinde and Bergthaler. The next year a large contingent left from the Old Colony as well. The journey of the Russian Mennonites to Canada followed the route through Danzig and Berlin and Hamburg, Germany and Liverpool, England. The journey took seven weeks, covered 10,000 miles and required seven different trains, five ships and two stretches by wagon.¹⁵ "From 1873 to 1884 approximately 18,000 Mennonites came to the central states and provinces from Russia".¹⁶

Within three years the whole Bergthal Colony and many from the Chortitza Colony had moved to Canada. As it turned out, this was a very wise decision and we



The farm once owned by Bernhard & Katherina Hildebrand situated in Rosenthal near Winkler, Manitoba. Photo Credit: Majorie Hildebrand

cannot but thank God for it. Our lives would have been very different had our forefathers decided to stay. The Bolshevik Revolution in the 1920s resulted in the suffering and destruction of hundreds of lives among the Mennonites who chose not to move in 1874-84. Typhus, cholera and venereal disease followed, claiming thousands.

In early spring of 1878, Bernhard and Katharina and their eight children, (daughter Katherina was born December 19, 1877), and 75-year old Grandmother Maria Doell, left March 20, 1878 for their trip to Canada. They arrived in Quebec on the SS. Peruvian No. 27 on June 30, 1878. With them on the ship were 260 Mennonites, all from Chortitza except one family from Bergthal, under the leadership of Wilhelm Rempel.¹⁷

Upon arrival in southern Manitoba they had the opportunity to buy a farm on which a new house and barn had been erected. The barn still did not have a roof. Buying this farm gave the Hildebrand family fresh courage to begin life in their new surroundings. The farm was located in the newly started village of Rosenthal, five miles south of what is now Winkler, on land number 10-2-4w.¹⁸

Bernhard in a letter written much later gives us some details of family life:

“On March 20, 1878, we left Russia with our beloved Mother Maria Doell entrusted to our care. She was 75 years of age. After five weeks of hardship and heavy seas, we were glad to arrive in Canada, and after a short resting period with the Doell family (sons to our mother) it was agreed that Mother should stay with us as soon as we had a place to live. After we had bought our farm on sec. 2 T. 4, R. 9 Mother came to live with us. After a few years she had a stroke and her condition gradually grew worse, so that she could no longer take care of herself during the last years. During those last years, my wife worked very hard to take care of her mother, and she was able to serve her till her death on August 31, 1887. We took care of the funeral expenses, and found that for the nine years we had taken care of mother, she had willed to us her right to homestead and so get land cheaply in our new country.



Bernhard & Katharina Hildebrand and family, a photo at the time of their arrival in Manitoba 1878. Photo Credit: Marjorie Hildebrand

At my own expense I drove out and looked for and found land on 3-3-7, which seemed like good soil to me. Then we went to Nelsonville to the Land Titles office and arranged for the homestead and an additional parcel of land to be bought there. I paid for expenses amounting to \$20.00. We built a shanty 114' x 14' for \$35.00, paid \$30.00 for plowing and another \$320.00 for the additional parcel of land next to our homestead. The title cost \$10.00, the sales contract and registration \$18.00 so that the total cost of the land was \$430.00.¹⁹

After enjoying their new home for some time something worrisome happened. The family heard that the land on which their village was located had a mortgage of \$900.00 which was held by a Finance Company. This was cause for concern. Bernhard and another man from the village decided to go to the Land Titles office in Morden, each going in separate



The nine sons & one daughter of Bernhard & Katharina Hildebrand. The man beside the daughter is her husband.

vehicles. They agreed to meet at the lawyer's office. After waiting there till 4 o'clock and his partner still had not arrived, the lawyer urged Bernhard to take the responsibility completely on himself. When Bernhard told him he had only \$500.00, the lawyer offered to loan him the rest. As a result the deal was made out to Bernhard Hildebrand. After that he was thought of as a rich man".²⁰

Later when his sons wanted to start farming on their own more land was needed. It was at this point that the homesteading rights he mentions in the letter were put to use. As a result the oldest two boys, Bernhard and Heinrich took

possession of the land in 1885, at what now is the Greenfarm village. Later four more sons made their home in that area, which was sometimes called Hildebrand's Darp. Gerhard lived in Schanzenfeld when he was first married, then later bought a house situated two miles west of the village, from his parents-in-law. The youngest two brothers, Peter and David, who were born in Canada, lived in Rosenbach, a neighboring district to Greenfarm.

Having so much land and having good crops resulted in a problem of being able to thresh all the grain in fall. In Russia they had shaped a stone so that it would roll over the heads of grain in the sheaves and thus cause the kernels to come out of the chaff. In a similar way they made a roller from a large block of wood cut from a tree about three feet in diameter. This was used for threshing grain. Next they made a machine to blow the chaff away from the kernels.²¹ Threshing machines were being manufactured in the United States, with the first ones being driven by horses walking around a large cogwheel. When the steam engine was invented someone bought a threshing machine and a steam engine that had to be moved by horses pulling them. The sheaves had to be fed into the threshing machine by hand. By 1885 steam engines that drove under their own power were available as well as ones that had a self-feeder for the sheaves. In this way the family did the threshing together until Bernhard passed away in 1910 at the age of 70.²²

The family of farmers was getting rather large to use one threshing machine and because smaller

machines were being manufactured, with tractors using kerosene as fuel, the large machine was traded off for smaller ones. Fewer farmers were required to operate the smaller machine, thus was the beginning of the small threshing gangs. By 1920 the Hildebrand family had three such threshing outfits.²³

Bernhard was also interested in the education of his family, particularly reading and writing. When his grandchildren came to visit they often saw their grandmother Katharina standing by the six-foot base of the large chimney, preparing delicious smelling food. Before long Grandfather Bernhard would call them aside and have them read out of the Church Hymnal, to make sure they were learning to read. He wanted all children to go to school and learn, and so he took interest in the process of their education.²⁴

Bernhard was a farmer at heart and wanted his children and grandchildren to become good farmers. At the same time he also had a heart for underprivileged children in the world. When they got a district school in Schanzenfeld they had a Mr. Penner as their teacher. After teaching a number of years he went to India as a missionary. He informed Bernhard that a school could be operated there for \$50.00 a year. As a result Bernhard sent this amount every year till his death in 1910.

This man's life was filled with hard labor and God blessed him in it. He was able to give each of his ten children 80 acres of land. He died at the age of 71 and his wife Katharina a year later at age 72.²⁵

The Fourth Generation - Gerhard, son of Bernhard Hildebrand III



Gerhard & Elizabeth Hildebrand. Photo Credit: Marjorie Hildebrand

When Bernhard and Katharina emigrated from Russia to Canada in 1878, they brought with them a family of eight children, seven sons and the youngest a baby girl a few months old. The youngest son at that time was Gerhard who was three. He grew up in Rosenthal with his family.

After living in the new country for seven years, his two oldest brothers Bernhard and Heinrich moved away to live in the village of Greenfarm. With time the next four brothers also moved there. For a year and a half, Gerhard was the oldest son at home. Katharina, his only sister, and the two boys Peter and David who were born in Canada, were younger than he.

In 1895 at age 20, Gerhard was baptized and joined the Bergthaler Church. He became interested in a blond curly haired young woman living near Schanzenfeld. She was tall, slim and real pretty. Her name was Elizabeth Reimer, daughter of Jacob and Maria Reimer. They were members of the Old Colony Church and so Elizabeth also joined this church. Her birthday was February 28 and the Catechism classes were held in spring so she had just turned 20. That was the age most young people decided to join the church.

Gerhard and Elizabeth planned for a wedding on August 14, 1898. Two weeks before the wedding, their banns were read in both their churches. However, they decided to join another group known as the Sommerfelder Church. This was a group that had left the Bergthaler group when they could not agree on some issues. Their first married years were spent in the village of Rosenthal.

Elizabeth's parents, Jacob and Maria Reimer had purchased a farm outside of Schanzenfeld some years prior. Jacob paid \$1.00 an acre for the quarter section of land. There was a yard with a house-barn unit already on it. The house was built of oak logs and smooth heavy beams with no knots showing. Many years later this house was dismantled and the wood used for firewood. Because they had chosen to move outside of a village, the Old Colony Church excommunicated them. It was contrary to tradition to live away from the village.

In 1912 Elizabeth's parents decided to sell their farm. Gerhard and Elizabeth were eager to buy the place. That same year a big red barn was moved onto the yard from Rosenthal. This feat was ingeniously completed with a series of wagon undercarriages bearing the sills of the building and then towed by teams of horses across the field.

Two years later, in 1914, they purchased a large two-story building that had been the high school in Winkler. It needed a lot of renovating before the family could move in. Four years later they were still not living in it. Their youngest daughter Agatha, born in 1918, was born in the old house. The wonderful day arrived when the furniture could be moved into the big new

house. How good it felt to have so much space for the large family!

These parents worked hard to make a living for their growing family. Their first baby was a son they named Gerhard after his dad, and two years later another son was born and this one was named Bernhard, after Grandfather Hildebrand. Jacob was their fourth child, born two years after Elizabeth, but he died on March 14, 1905 at the age of two, after 10 days of illness. Maria was born that same year on September 27. Tina and Jacob (the name Jacob was important because it was the name of Elizabeth's father) were born within the next three years.

In 1910 she had two babies, one in February and one the following December, and the next year in December another one, all boys but they all died as infants. A year and a half later Helena was born, a strong healthy girl. Then came Peter and Aganetha, but Peter died of complications from measles before the birth of their last child, Agatha, in 1918.

Gerhard was by this time 40 years old and his wife two years younger. They had been married 20 years and Elizabeth had gone through 14 pregnancies with nine healthy children growing up around her. But five tiny graves were a reminder of their loss.

Gerhard was a Vorsaeuger in the Sommerfelder Church, a respected position in the Mennonite community. These were the song leaders who chose the songs as well as gave the initial tone by singing the first phrase. The congregation then followed. There were no musical instruments allowed in the church. His son Bernhard followed in his footsteps when he became a Vorsaeuger in the Waldheim Sommerfelder Church and later in the Reinland Rudnerweider Church.

Gerhard and Elizabeth saw their sons and daughters growing up to become adults. In 1921 Gerhard Jr. married Mary Dyck and the following year in November another wedding took place when daughter Elizabeth married Abram Suderman. This was the fulfillment of their dreams, to see their family grow up, get married and start farming on their own. Soon grandchildren would fill their lives.

Then tragedy struck in the life of Elizabeth. On Thursday, October 14, 1926 Gerhard suddenly had an aneurysm while bending down to check something on the car standing on the yard. He was taken to the house by members of the family. Winkler had just the year before been privileged to have a resident medical doctor. Dr. Cornelius Wiebe and his family moved to Winkler in 1925.²⁶ The young doctor was sent for but he was unable to help.

Gerhard not quite fifty years old died three hours later. What a shock and terrible loss for Elizabeth! She was left to care for the younger children alone, the youngest being just eight years old.

The body was washed and dressed at home and laid in a coffin built locally by a Mennonite coffin builder. On Sunday, October 17 the funeral service was held in the "scheen", a part of the barn from which hay was thrown up to the loft.

Sunday, October 17 had been the day on which Bernhard and his bride, Helena Reimer were to announce their wedding banns. The funeral interrupted that, postponing the announcement for another three weeks. Instead of having an October wedding, Bernhard and Helena were married November 21, after the Sunday morning service in the Rosenbach Sommerfelder Church. Helena wore a dark dress, as was the custom for Sommerfelder brides. That same evening people gathered at the Hildebrand home for a time of visiting and well wishing for the young couple. Some also brought "Pulta Geschenk" or a wedding present. Bernhard and Helena spent that first winter of their married life with Mother Elizabeth.

Mary and Isaac Dyck and Tina and Henry Martens had a double wedding the following year on October 2, 1927. That left Jacob and his three sisters to help Elizabeth for the next five years till Jacob married Helena Rempel on July 27, 1932. Jacob and his wife Helena lived in the family home with Elizabeth.

By 1941 all of the nine children were married. Agatha and husband Martin Penner who were married April 13, 1941, lived with Jake & Helena, their nine children and Mother Elizabeth in the "big" house for eight years. These were years of learning to accept and tolerate each other.

In 1949 this changed when Martin and Agatha bought a house in Rosengard and moved it onto the yard. This was well built, having used 2x4s to raise the walls with big strong beams in the ceiling. No studs were needed. It cost Martin \$200.00 to move this house the eleven miles from Rosengard to the Hildebrand farm in Schanzenfeld. How wonderful to move into their own place with their four young children, ages one to seven. In 1960, after Mother Elizabeth's death, the land was divided among her eight children. Martin and Agatha then moved the house onto their own land, just east of

the homestead. This cost Martin \$100.00.

Aganetha was the last one to get married. She married Henry Penner, Martin's brother, on December 7, 1941. By then there were 44 grandchildren. Gerhard had lived long enough to see only three of them, his son Gerhard's four-year-old little daughter Maria and daughter Elizabeth's two-year-old son Abram, and his namesake, a stillborn son born to Elizabeth September 2, just 16 days before his death.

The Fifth Generation - Bernhard Hildebrand, son of Gerhard & Elizabeth Hildebrand, April 6, 1901-March 31, 1962



The Bernhard G. & Helena Hildebrand Family taken in 1950.. One son Daniel Bernie was born in 1951. Photo Credit: Marjorie Hildebrand



Elm Grove Farm where the Bernhard G. Hildebrand family lived from 1937-62. The barn was built in 1950 and the house in 1951 and are still in good condition. Photo Credit: Marjorie Hildebrand

The Name Bernhard

The second son of Gerhard and Elizabeth Hildebrand of Schanzenfeld was named after his grandfather Bernhard who immigrated to Manitoba in 1878. The name Bernhard Hildebrand has been perpetuated since about 1768, when the records show the name Bernhard Hildebrand. All the children of Bernhard and Katharina had a son by that name, except David. Of Gerhard's family only his son Bernhard and daughter Maria chose to name one of their sons Bernhard, and Maria's son died in infancy. That leaves only Bernhard's son Daniel Bernie in that generation. However, Gerhard (Jerry) son of Bernhard has a son named Bernard Mark

who has a son named David Bernard. So there you go - the name Bern(h)ard Hildebrand is still alive and well! In other words, from 1795-1996 there are seven generations where there is a male by the name of Bern(h)ard Hildebrand.

Bernhard Hildebrand, son of Gerhard, was 19 when he joined the Sommerfelder Church in 1920. His older brother Gerhard married the following year, leaving Bernhard as the oldest son at home. On November 21, 1926 he married his pretty brown-haired, brown-eyed young bride, Helena Reimer from Blumstein. He was 25 years old and she was 18. The death of his father just a month prior was still very painful. Who

would stand by and give a hand to begin his farming career?

That first winter they lived with Mother Elizabeth. In spring they were able to move to a place in Friedensruh where they stayed till 1931. Three children were born there, Elizabeth, Gerhard (Jerry) and Helen. In the spring of 1931 Bernhard rented a farm in Waldheim where a house and barn built together became home for the next six years.

Three daughters were born to them while living in Waldheim, Annie, Tina and Mary. Helena did her best to keep the children dressed and fed. These were the years of the Great Depression. To help out the Red Cross sent shoes and clothing for distribution to needy families. Helena went through the sack of used items and took what she felt she could use. Whatever was left Bernhard took to the neighbors, the Peter Krahn family.

In March 1937 Bernhard rented a farm and moved his family near the village of Neuenberg, eight miles southeast of Winkler. Five more children were born. Here is where Bernhard and Helena grew in their Christian faith and started attending the Winkler EMM Church.

As time went on he prospered as a farmer and was able to purchase the farm with the help of a loan. He paid \$4800.00 for the 240 acres.

In 1950, 13 years after moving to this place, he tore down the old barn and built a new barn with Jake Neufeld as contractor. His son Jerry did most of the painting and it was decided to call the farm Elm Grove Farm. This name was painted on the west end of the new red barn and is there to this day.

The following year he built a two-storey house with a roomy kitchen and dining room, living room, bathroom and bedroom downstairs and four bedrooms upstairs. They lived there till 1962 when after he suffered a severe stroke in spring, Bernhard passed away, leaving Helena a widow at 54 years of age. The three youngest children were still in elementary and high school and Helena decided to sell the farm and move to Winkler.

Eventually all eleven in the family, who were the sixth generation, received a university education, choosing nursing, teaching and business as their vocations. Two daughters passed away from cancer in 2002, eighteen days apart. All married and together they have 27 sons and daughters, spread all over the globe. By now there is a growing eighth generation.

Dr. Jerry Hildebrand grew up near the village of Neuenberg, Winkler, in a family of nine girls and two boys. He was

the second oldest and his only brother the youngest. Jerry trained to be a teacher, a pastor and a missionary. He is married to the former Marjorie Wiebe and they have five children and 12 grandchildren. In 1961 they left for South Brazil and spent 16 years as church planters with WorldTeam Mission.

After moving back to Canada in 1976, Jerry became the first Missions Director of the Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference and after nine years studied in Chicago for two years, then taught at



Jerry and Marjorie Hildebrand, 2007. Photo Credit: Marjorie Hildebrand

Steinbach Bible College for 10 years. He received his Doctor of Missiology degree in 1995. After retiring the couple volunteered for two years with MCC in Aylmer, ON, after which Jerry was hired as Associate Pastor in the Winkler EMMC till June 2004.

Endnotes

- 1 Lehn Diary, Archives of Mennonite Heritage Center
600 Shaftsbury, Winnipeg
- 2 Cornelius J. Dyck. *An Introduction to Mennonite*

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- 4 Lehn Diary, p. 51
- 5 Henry Schapansky, "Neuenburg: Old Colony Russia," *Mennonite Family History*, July 1990, 95.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Henry C. Smith. *The Story of the Mennonites*. (Newton: Faith and Life Press, 1981), 389
- 8 Benjamin Unruh. *Die niederländisch-niederdeutschen Hintergründe der mennonitischen Ostwanderungen im 16., 18. und 19. Jahrhundert* (Karlsruhe: By the author, 1955).
- 9 Gerhard Hildebrand's family register. The original and a copy are in the Winkler Heritage Society archives situated in the Winkler Library.
- 10 Information gleaned from Mrs. John Werner, Steinbach, who came to Canada from the Old Colony in Russia in 1951.
- 11 John Dyck, ed. *The Bergthal Gemeinde Buch*. (Steinbach: Hanover Steinbach Historical Society, 1993). An interesting aside here is that two of Agata's grandchildren later married, Isaac the grandson of Bernhard and Agata Hildebrand and Agatha, Granddaughter of Agata and Franz Loewen. Isaac and Agatha Hildebrand lived in Greenfarm, MB.
- 12 Schapansky, 95.
- 13 "Family History of Bernhard Hildebrand," by John M. Hildebrand, Winkler.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Reynold Sawatsky, "Historical Sketch of the Henry M. Klassen Family," unpublished paper, 1976.
- 16 Dyck, *An Introduction to Mennonite History*, 154.
- 17 Dyck, *Bergthal Gemeinde Buch*.
- 18 John M. Hildebrand, "Family History:"
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Mavis Reimer. *Cornelius W. Wiebe, A Beloved Physician* (Winnipeg: Hyperion Press Limited, 1983), 19.

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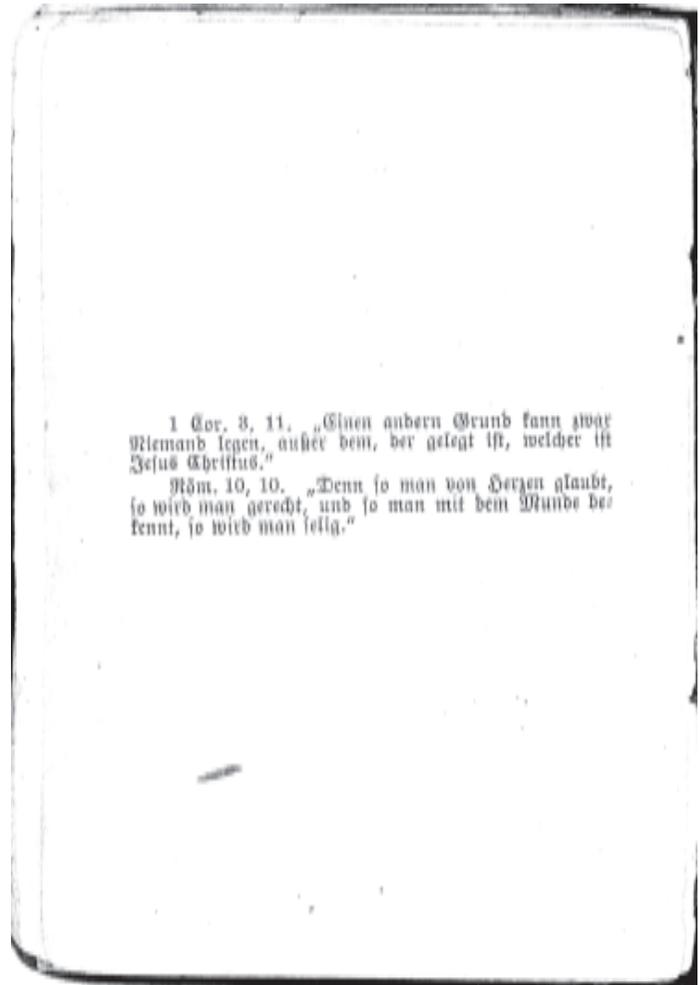
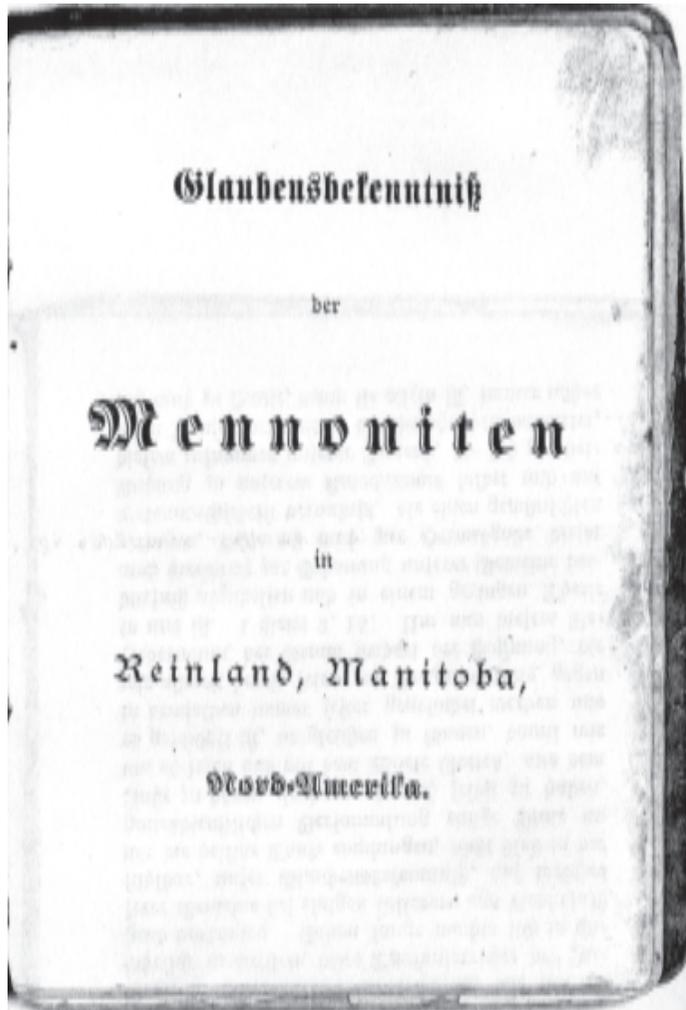
PRESERVING INTEGRITY

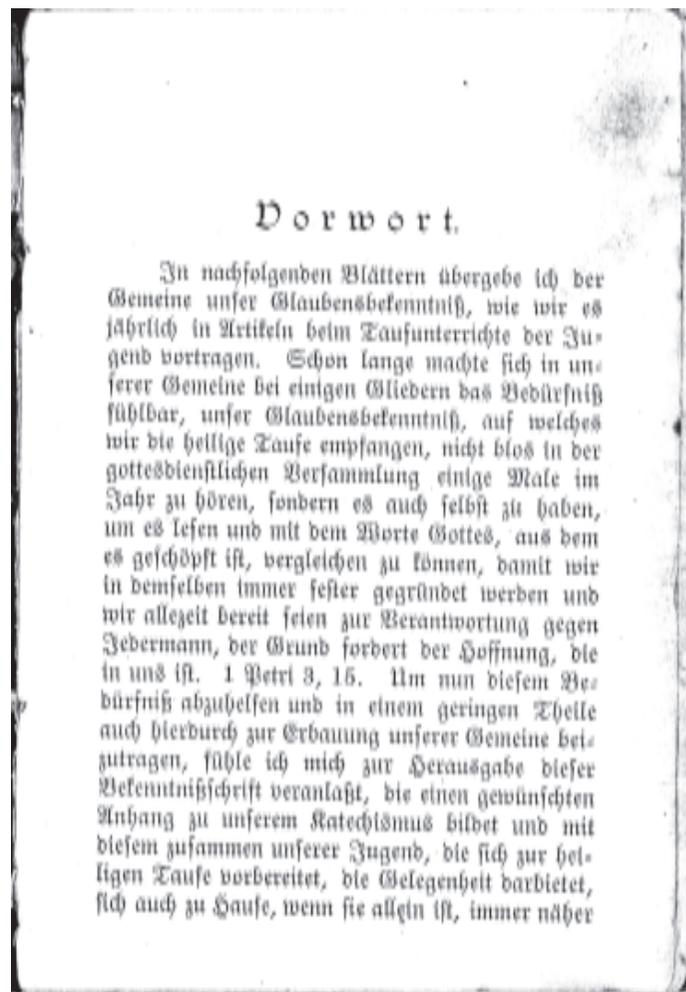
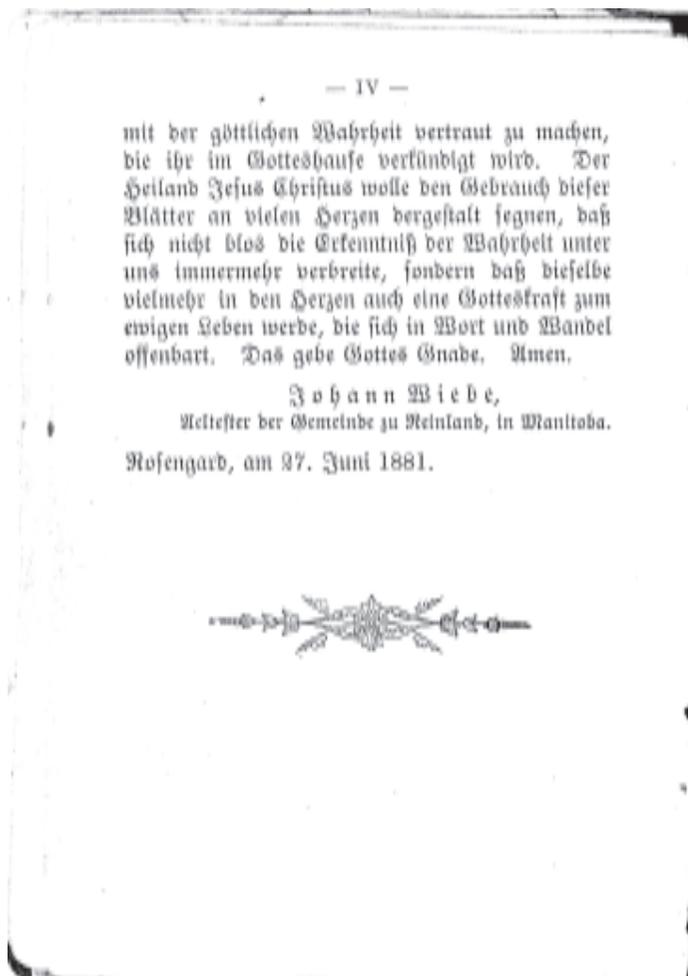
By Bruce Wiebe

Aeltester Johann Wiebe of the Reinlaender Mennoniten Gemeinde was an articulate and literate but humble Church Leader both in Fuerstenland, Russia, and here on the West Reserve of Manitoba. The extent of his writings, much of it described in Delbert Plett, ed. *Old Colony Mennonites in Canada* (Steinbach: Crossway Publications, 2001), is quite remarkable. However, his most well known writing dated June 26, 1881, was the "Foreward" to the Confession of Faith. To date, all references to this Foreward in published works cite the Author as Johannes Wiebe, drawing on the name

given in most known copies of post 1881 Katechisms. However, in all other letters, rundschriften, etc, Wiebe never refers to himself as nor signs as Johannes, merely Johann. Johannes appears too pretentious given his humility. The first known publications closest to the date of writing of his Foreward are the "Katechismus, nebst Glaubens-Bekenntnis der Mennoniten in Manitoba" published by the Mennonitische Verlagshandlung, Elkhart Indiana in 1885 and 1889. In both of these Editions, his name is simply given as "Johann Wiebe." Even the Title Page reads simply:

"Glaubensbekenntnis der Mennoniten in Reinland, Manitoba, Nord-Amerika." Later editions which use the name Johannes also become more inclusive, "Glaubensbekenntnis der Mennoniten in Manitoba, Nordamerika." The first known of these later editions was published 1904* by the Mennonite Publishing House, Plum Coulee, Manitoba and subsequently again by Elkhart. Aeltester Wiebe died in February 1905. Whether he was aware of the name change or not, the survival of the 1885 and 1889 Katechisms preserves the integrity of this influential Mennonite spiritual leader.





Film and Book Reviews

STELLET LICHT

Carlos Reygadas, 2007.

It has been said before, the movie 'Stellet Licht,' by renowned Mexican film producer Carlos Reygadas, is not really about the Old Colony people of Mexico. It makes no such claim in the movie; in fact as I recalled it, the word 'Mennonite' does not appear in the movie and the language of the film, Plautdietsch, is not explained. Then, too, the movie depicts no Mennonite institutional life: the church is non-existent, the parents take the children swimming but no school is apparent, the father travels to the local garage to pick up a repaired crankshaft but there is no cheese factory, no credit union. Even the plot seems far fetched, a Mennonite father falls in love with another woman, a fellow Mennonite at

that; it is not that infidelity has not occurred in Mennonite communities, but here the father talks about it to his elderly father, shares it openly with his wife. And there seem to be so many errors: the family prays far too long and only at the beginning of the meal, the Low German spoken does not always match the English subtitles, candles linked to a funeral scene are completely out of place.

But all who watch it know of course that it is about an Old Colony family in Mexico: we recognize the clothes, the names, the customs, the language, the architecture, and the actors are all Mennonites. Manitobans recognize the mother, Esther as Miriam Toews, the author of several best

selling novels, and the father, the other woman, the children are all Mennonites from Mexico. I even think I recognize the mountain which towered over my grandparents' farm in Springstein in Los Jagueyes Colony (it appears repeatedly just to the left side of the repair shop in the scene in which Johann drives circles around the garage's repair shop).



And the lifestyle is certainly Old Colony: the family farms corn and cattle, the father repairs the combine harvester, the mother tends to a small flock of blond, blue-eyed children. They even pray quietly, sing Langewies and dress 'plain'—father in overalls and cowboy hat, mother in print dress and black kerchief. And the family is so very quiet spoken, so understated, so comfortable with silence.

But what is significant about the movie? Well, first an international audience has come to learn about at least some aspects of the culture of the Old Colony in Mexico. The fact is that the producer is a famous Mexican film maker and the film won an award at the world's leading film festival in Cannes, France. So, what we see in 'Stellet Licht' is how the world comes to see the Old Colony people of Mexico. And what do they see? Well, they realize at once that this community is not perfect: the movie is about infidelity and it seems believable. A father falls in love with another woman, and struggles deeply

and internally with it; the 'sin' is not taken lightly and his father counsels him to stop the tryst; even the 'other' woman declares that the relationship must end for the desire for 'peace is stronger than the [emotion of] love.' But if the wider world sees the actors as 'flesh and blood' people, they also see other features of Old Colony life. They are a plain people: but these 'old orders' drive trucks and possess electricity, even listen to Spanish music. They even sneak away to watch television, introduced into the community by an English-speaking, van-driving American tourist of sorts. And although the dress is mostly 'plain', the teenagers have picked up 'English' dress habits from some place and evidently the extended family, judging by their dress, has fallen by the wayside.

But to my mind what comes across as a central aspect of this culture is that the actors are absolutely nonviolent. There is resignation and stoicism, quiet and bitter pain, slow conversation, complete honesty, genuine inter-familial caring, remarkable

acts of kindness. Even though trust has been broken there is no yelling, no fighting, no divorce. The bitter pain is carried quietly; it is expressed in giving up, and giving up the ultimate gift of life. The movie ends with what appears to be a life giving expression of love, of forgiveness. It seems that the movie producer wanted to tell a love story that had these elements and found the canvass on which to paint this picture among the stoic Mennonites of northern Mexico. The way the love story unfolds seems natural because the culture in which it is played out is believable and genuine. Thus, while the movie is not about Mennonites, traditional Mennonite culture is indispensable in the telling of this story. The producer wanted a people who would carry the message of 'quiet light' and he found them on the edge of an Old Colony (or Sommerfelder) colony in Mexico.

by Royden Loewen
Chair in Mennonite Studies
University of Winnipeg

"Living in a Perfect World."

Diego D'Innocenzo, Marco Leopardi, 2006, 70 min., National Geographic.

"Living in a Perfect World" follows the stories of four Old Colony Mennonites, Aganetha, Cornelio, Pedro, Jacobo, living in the Chihuahuan desert of northern Mexico on the colonies of El Sabinal and El Capulín. Over the course of the video, these four Mennonites deal with the vexatious issue of modernization, embodied in state-provided electricity. El Sabinal, which Aganetha and Pedro call home, has resisted such modernization whereas El Capulín, the residence of Cornelio and Jacobo decided in favor of electricity several years ago.

To highlight the difficulties faced by the residents of El Sabinal, we are shown a bleak desert landscape devoid of vegetation, agricultural fields on which nothing can grow because of lack of irrigation. We are let in on a secret meeting of five household heads who wish to modernize.

Aganetha is the colony dentist on El Sabinal. She assumed her father's practice when he relocated to El Capulín because of the greater opportunities that modernization offered. Indeed, because of the ready supply of electricity, he has been able to upgrade his equipment. On a visit to El Capulín, her father urges Aganetha to join him, for there is plenty of clientele for

the two of them. Aganetha would like El Sabinal to modernize, but she is caught in the web of a restrictive church leadership that resists any modernization.

Pedro's frustration at the strictures of the colony boil over and he seeks assistance from a young Mexican man in an internet café who helps him land a job, not only off the colony, but in the United States. Over beer, Pedro and his Mexican friend discuss the restrictive religion that denies Pedro his dream of freedom. Understandably, the Mexican computer whiz is amazed that anyone would tolerate such oppression. Pedro is successful in his bid for freedom and we see him crossing the Rio Grande into American freedom as the video concludes.

In contrast to El Sabinal, El Capulín has modernized and become economically viable. This relative prosperity is embodied in Cornelio, the colony auctioneer and cheese marketer. He welcomed the advent of electricity and his business of cheese production and marketing has prospered. We see him contemplating expanding his cheese business through a partnership arrangement with a Mexican distributor. However, Cornelio, despite his economic prosperity, bemoans the lost way of life that anti-modernization allowed. With the



advent of modernization and the use of gas-powered vehicles, young men are now able to gain access to the ready supply of alcohol in nearby Mexican villages, and this has threatened family and community harmony. In a closing scene in which Cornelio's extended family is crowded around a television set, he laments the moral and social changes that have taken place on El Capulín.

As the colony auctioneer, Cornelio has witnessed first hand the exodus of El Capulín residents who opposed the colony's decision to modernize. One such resident is Jacobo, a family man who decided to relocate to Bolivia. On the colony of Florida in Bolivia, Jacobo is able to maintain the family cohesion that he feared would disintegrate on El Capulín. But he

has been able to do so only by fragmenting the social cohesion of his extended family and El Capulin.

“Living in a Perfect World” addresses what is regularly seen as the central issue facing Mennonites on many colonies in Latin America: the degree to which they will accommodate technological innovation. By following the stories of four individuals who draw the line of accommodation at different points, some of the complexity of that reality is made evident. Certainly we are made aware of the strain and disruption that the issue of modernization brings to individuals, families and Mennonite colony life. But my contention with the video lies

in the way in which it uses the Mennonite ideal of separation from the world—a “perfect world” as the title suggests—to assess the viability of Mennonite colony life. In the face of the impossibility of an ideal, all four characters become victims of the ideal rather than realist agents who work to express their ideal through their religious, social, and economic reality. Jacobo and Aganetha remain true to the ideal, i.e. they live without electricity, but remind us that the cost is too great; too late Cornelio realizes the worth of his lost ideal as he watches the simple life disintegrate in the colony around him; Pedro rejects the ideal altogether and becomes the quintessential

immigrant to the United States who crosses the Rio Grande to find the freedom that eluded him on El Sabinal. Had the film makers asked themselves how Mennonites seek to establish a viable life as a balance between their religious/cultural ideals and the stark economic reality of northern Mexico, rather than tracking their pursuit of an elusive utopia, we might have been offered a fresh and new look at Mennonite life instead of the hackneyed “types” that fail to do justice to the complexity of Mennonite colony life.

By Kerry Fast
Toronto, Ontario

Amish Grace. How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy

Donald B. Kraybill, Steven M. Nolt, David L. Weaver-Zercher, San Francisco, CA: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 2007.

Amish Grace discusses the Amish response of forgiveness to the tragedy at Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, where Charles Carl Roberts IV shot ten of their children. The Amish response was so different than the usual response to such violence, that the three authors decided to try to help readers understand why the Amish were able to provide forgiveness so quickly after the shooting had happened.

Donald Kraybill narrates the story of the disaster, and the immediate aftermath. Kraybill who is senior fellow at the Young Centre of Elizabethtown College, has written extensively on Old Order Amish and Mennonite groups, including *Horse and Buggy Mennonites: Hoof-Beats for Humility in a Post-Modern World*, *The Amish Struggle with Modernity*, and *The Amish and the State*. He traveled to the school the day after the shooting, observed the setting, and spoke to more than three dozen Amish. Eight of these he quotes extensively, all with pseudonyms to respect their desire for privacy.

The other two authors are also eminently qualified to write about the Amish, and have written extensively about them. Steven Nolt is professor of history at Goshen College and author of *A History of the Amish*, and *An Amish Patchwork: Indiana's Amish in the Modern World*. David L. Weaver-Zercher is associate professor of American religious history at Messiah College, Grantham, Pennsylvania. His books *The Amish in the American Imagination*, and *Writing the Amish, the Worlds of John A. Hostettler*, focus on outsider's fascination with, and perceptions of, the Amish.

The three authors tell the tragic story of the events at the Nickel Mines Amish School with clarity and sensitivity. They relate how on that fateful October 2, 2006 morning, Charles Roberts, a milk truck driver, kissed his children good-by, wrote a suicide note, gathered the supplies for his deadly plans into his truck, did his usual milk-truck run, got to the school too early, bought a soda drink at the auction house about 400 yards away, and watched the school children finish their morning recess. Then, when the children were in the school, he backed his truck up to the front steps, and entered.

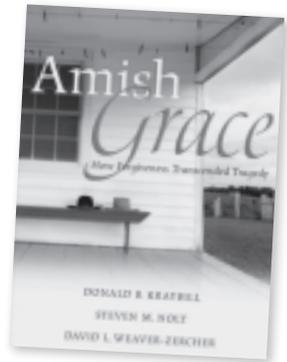
What followed was a tale of surreal horror in this school in the midst of a large Amish community. Roberts confronted the teacher and students, and ordered them to lie down on the floor. The teacher and her mother, who was visiting that morning, escaped and fled to a neighbour to call for help. Roberts was unnerved to find that there were also a number of other visitors in school that day, and ordered the visitors and the boys out of the school. He pulled the blinds, brought in guns, and carried in boards to nail the doors shut.

Within half an hour of entering the school, the first police arrived, and Roberts knew his plans to molest the girls were not going to work. He threatened the girls, and they realized he planned to shoot them. He said someone had to die because his own daughter had died ten years ago, and he was angry with God. One girl, the oldest, offered that he shoot her and spare the rest. The police called out on bullhorns for him to surrender. Roberts shouted for the police to leave, and said he would kill the

children if they did not. Without waiting for a response, he began to shoot. The police forced their way into the school, and as they did so, Roberts killed himself.

In those few moments Roberts had managed to shoot all ten girls. Ambulances and medivac helicopters carried the dead and wounded to nearby hospitals. Four girls died almost immediately, and one later. Parents were summoned, and taken to hospitals to try to find their children. In the chaos, some parents went to a number of hospitals before finding their children. At least in one case their child had died by the time they arrived.

By the evening of the same day, Amish were already voicing forgiveness to the gunman. Different people, without conferring with each other, were extending forgiveness for Roberts, and compassion and acceptance for Robert's wife, Amy, and family. They visited Amy, brought her food, came to her husband's funeral, and cried with the family. The Amish asked Amy and her children not to move from the community. When money rolled in, and a fund was established to assist the wounded Amish girls, the Amish offered to set aside a portion of the fund to assist Roberts' children, because, as the Amish said, the family had lost their wage earner. In word and deed, the Amish forgave, and



extended a hand of assistance and comfort to the Roberts' family.

The authors speak to two questions that puzzled outsiders: Why did the Amish forgive, and why so quickly?

The reason why the Amish forgave, the writers say, is "spun from their faith in God, scriptural mandates, and a history of persecution." (p. 52) One way the Amish continually reinforce their view of unconditional and immediate forgiveness is through the Lord's Prayer, which says, "Forgive us this day our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." The Lord's Prayer is used as a table grace, is recited in school, and is used in church. It defines the Amish view of grace. Unless one forgives, ones own salvation is in jeopardy. And some of the Amish responded to outsider's puzzled questions with the response, "Isn't that what all Christians do"?

For the Amish, the words of forgiveness were not nearly as important as the deeds. Their visits, gifts of food, attendance at the funeral, and financial assistance gave flesh to their words.

An incidental result of the Amish's acts of forgiveness was that they provided a powerful witness for the Christian gospel. Their deeds had the kind of integrity that the words alone of public evangelists could not even come close to matching. Who would have imagined that the humble Amish could outdo the televangelists in communicating the Christian gospel?

The reason why the Amish forgave so quickly is also rooted in the Lord's Prayer. It is the Amish understanding that if they did not forgive, they were putting their own salvation in jeopardy. Therefore it was imperative that they forgive immediately. For the Amish in Nickel Mines to have delayed forgiving would have been to put their own eternal salvation at risk.

Amish Grace deals with an event within the Swiss-Amish tradition, and so why is this relevant here, in a journal of the Russian Mennonite heritage? The reason why this book is reviewed here is that what it

says about the Amish could also be said about Old Colony people. Both are the so-called conservatives within their faith traditions. Both have defined Christian faithfulness as being separate from the "world," that is, from those, who in their view, do not have faith in God, nor follow the teachings of the Bible. Both have rejected worldly power, military aggressiveness, and participation in public political office. Both have rejected modern consumerism and many forms of technology. Both have little formal connection or communication with other Mennonite groups. Both have a strong belief in community, and thus have developed strong in-group relationships. Both faithfully express an important biblical teaching of separation from the world, as express in texts like II Cor. 6:14 and 17. Separation from the world and its rejection of the Lordship of Christ has been an important tenet of the Anabaptist-Mennonite heritage from the sixteenth century onward, and has roots that go back to the Catholic monastic tradition, and through it to the early days of the Christian Church.

Why then, given all these similarities, have the Amish largely been seen positively, and the Old Colonists almost universally, negatively? Why this difference in perception?

Recent writers, not least of them being the three who authored *Amazing Grace*, have pointed out the Amish church's strong, biblical theology. Their understanding of the forgiveness section of the Lord's Prayer is just one example. Their understanding of community as embodying Christian faith, of sharing and mutual support as central to an understanding of Christian love, and of the sparse use of technology as being good stewards of God's earth, are additional examples of the positives that their faith exemplify.

Why have similar positive interpretations not been made of the Old Colonists? Is it because they have not had the sustained scholarly attention that the Amish have had? Is it because they have settled in more

out-of-the-way places, and have thus been ignored by scholars and seen as suspect by other Mennonites? Is it because some Old Colonists have been economically poor, and have thus been victims of a conscious, or subconscious, class bias? Is it because in Canada and the United States contact is primarily with those Old Colonists who are marginal to the community, who have migrated, people thus primarily see their weaknesses, not their strengths? Is it because the Old Colonists are separatists, and not engaged in active proselytizing, that they have been written off as not expressing a valid way of being Christian? And, why is active proselytizing more biblical than separation from the world, since both are based on biblical teachings?

A more positive way of viewing the Old Colonists could include seeing that they have repeatedly been pioneers, opening up new areas for settlement in Russia, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, Mexico, Paraguay, Belize, and Bolivia. In most of these areas of new settlement, they formed the community structures and pioneered the agricultural patterns that allowed later groups to succeed. Usually the later groups were the more liberal, more acculturated, more evangelical Mennonite groups, who often repaid their indebtedness to the conservatives by denigrating them, and trying to convert them. And yet, it was the pioneering work of the conservatives that often made it possible for later Mennonites to succeed.

This book, *Amish Grace*, makes an important contribution to seeing Old Colony Mennonites more positively. By helping readers to see the positive side of the Amish, it can also open the door to a more positive view of Old Colonists. It provides a paradigm shift of how to view the conservatives within the Anabaptist-Mennonite family.

by John J. Friesen
Professor Emeritus
Canadian Mennonite University

Forever Home: Good Old Days On The Farm

Victor Carl Friesen, (Calgary: Fifth House, 2004).

Forever Home: Good old days on the farm is the title of the latest book by Victor Carl Friesen of Rosthern, Saskatchewan. The book is a series of short stories based on Friesen's experiences growing up on a farm near Rosthern. He was born July 13, 1933 to Abram A. Friesen (1884-1950) and

Anna Friesen (1899-1988), youngest of 6 children. He always seemed to have an appetite for education, especially literature, and after finishing his primary education in the country school he went on and graduated from the University of Saskatchewan with three degrees between 1961 and 1965.

He went on to teach in various primary and secondary environments. In 1983 he left teaching to become a freelance writer. He has penned other titles, including *The Windmill Turning*, *The Mulberry Tree*, *The Spirit of Huckleberry*, *The Year is a Circle*, and *Where the River Runs*. His



writings have also appeared in several magazines, journals and anthologies. In 1990 he married Dorothy Grant.

The foreward of the book states that in order to write good memoirs the prose needs to be authentic and bridge the experi-

ence of the individual to the universal. This book does both. The book is based on Friesen's own experiences and is authentic.

The time frame for the stories in the book are Friesen's growing up years and early adulthood when he was a teacher. Themes such as work around the home, farmyard chores, school days and going to town each have several short 2-4-page stories.

The book is descriptively written with a sense of warmth. As a reader some 40 years Friesen's junior, I find the book makes some bridges and connects with me. There are portions where I can identify with his stories. Stories such as "The Hayloft" and "The Old Smokehouse" have elements in them that are familiar to me. The stories are descriptive in nature in that they give some information how an activity was done such as stooking, but the strength and warmth come from Friesen recounting his thoughts, tastes, smells and feelings as related to each topic:

First of all grain was cut with a horse-drawn binder... Our binder, an eight-foot Deering was used right till my father died,

in 1950.... There was a sense of pride when the binder was finally working and loaded with twine and the farmer sat ready on its spring seat... In his hands were the reins to the three or four horses in front, and beneath his foot was the pedal operating the bamboo carrier. Beside him, in its cast-iron support, stood a bamboo pole, used as a prod to keep the horses pulling evenly.

Rest and cold water were often the two main thoughts in a stooker's mind. There was the endless bending down, digging one's fingers into tightly packed bundles, then flinging one under each arm in preparation for standing them upright in an inverted v upon the stubble. This was the start of a round stook. A half dozen more bundles leaning upon the initial two completed it. If the binder had left a sheaf of grain untied, then some lengths of grain were twisted into a rope and gathered about the loose pile to make a snug bundle.

Fingertips became sore, arms felt the prickle of briars bound in with the bundle, muscles ached, and perspiration flowed. At the end of the day, ankles were scratched from stepping among the sharp stubble. What was worse was their itchiness from dust and plant oozings from the severed stalks...

As we looked across the field and saw the stooks, backlit by the sun and standing each in its pool of shadow amid the tawny stubble, the scene spoke to us of nesting robins and bluebirds, of temporary victory over an unpredictable machine, of aching muscles and thirst and perseverance, of setting sun and rising moon, of family

fellowship and finally a good job done. It was indeed a beautiful sight. p. 64-67.

Social histories speak from the vantage point of the everyday person. Friesen's recollections do an admirable job of giving information and personality to everyday activities. Too often people write about a unique experience they had, such as a trip, and neglect to document what life was like on a daily basis. One aspect that is weak is family dynamics. What were the relationships like between siblings, parent and child, neighbours? Friesen also peppers the book with quotations from other authors which, for me, is distracting.

Forever Home is an easy-to-read book that transports readers into a different era with grace and warmth, and leaves them with a new understanding of life on the Canadian prairies. The short stories are delightful, and may well provide the escape or distraction needed from one's own everyday life. The book would make a great conversation starter with others of Friesen's generation who also grew up on the prairies. How were their experiences the same or different from what Friesen describes?

Friesen is to be commended for a fine authentic book that reaches the reader. *Forever Home* would be a welcome addition to many homes.

by Conrad Stoesz
archivist at the Mennonite Heritage Centre and the Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies, both in Winnipeg.

Outside the World: Cohesion and Deviation Among Old Colony Mennonites in Bolivia

Anna Sofia Hedburg. (Uppsala, Sweden: Uppsala University, 2007), 273pp., ISBN: 978-91-554-6999-3.

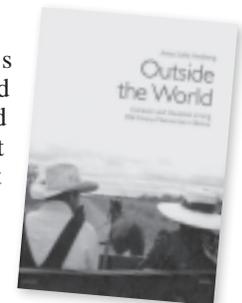
Anna Sofia Hedberg's book *Outside the World*, captures the Old Colony Mennonite Durango colony's paths to maintaining their way of life in the Bolivian Gran Chaco. As her subtitle suggests, she focuses on how the Old Colony Mennonites remain together as a society and the role of social control and deviation in maintaining the physical and symbolic boundaries around the community. In her anthropological study, Hedberg describes the Old Colony Mennonite life and the interconnections

between the Old Colonists and the Bolivian society in which they live.

A unique aspect of this book is its non-judgmental character. As a non-Mennonite, the author approaches the community without the baggage of bias that often comes from other Mennonites or from those who have left the Old Colony. She is critical of the way other Mennonite organizations and churches, and former Old Colony Mennonites make judgments about and interfere with what Old Colony Mennonites believe

and how they live.

While Hedberg's manuscript is a bound PhD dissertation, and reads like a thesis, it provides an important and scholarly ethnographic study of a little studied population. She spent more than a year in field research in Durango between 2004 and 2006,



spending time getting to know the people of the colony as well as the local Izoceño-Guaraníes with whom the Mennonites do business. Most of her discussions were held in Spanish, since she did not know Low German. Her lack of Low German, as she herself states, did not give her as much access to the women as the men, since few women speak another language. She justifies her position because her study focuses on the margins of the community. Nevertheless, it is apparent that women's voices and experiences hardly appear in the book.

She begins the book by outlining her research, the ideas behind how she proceeded, and the tools she used to analyze her data. The intent of her research is larger than just this one community as she seeks to contribute to the understanding of how communities keep themselves going and how they manage to stick together for the same purposes. One way or method she used in her research process was storytelling or 'narrative'. She had people tell their stories, since as she says; stories are a gateway between the past, present and future and expose the reality of people's lives.

A short account of Mennonite history and beliefs to contextualize the group she is studying is followed by recognizing several principles and values upon which the Old Colony Mennonite community is based. These include the perpetuation of conservatism, rejecting change in order to isolate themselves from the world, and to live by the unwritten rules of the *Ordnung*.

The community maintains itself by "carrying out Old Colony Mennonite everyday culture" (p. 83). She describes the structure of life in Durango which is centered on agriculture, and the nuclear family as the primary economic unit. The colony sets up boundaries to maintain themselves; these boundaries include the physical like dress and language, and the boundaries of ideas such as who one is allowed to marry,

with whom one can be friends and how one is to behave.

Salvation, Hedberg states, is an important driving force for the Old Colony Mennonites. It can be understood, she says, using a French philosopher's idea of "forthcoming." "Forthcoming" is a hope for the future that is never attained. Old Colony Mennonites invest themselves in their way of life because of a hope for obtaining something in the future that is never realized. They live their lives as a means of attempting to gain *Himmelreich* or the heavenly kingdom, but they do not believe they can ever be sure of obtaining it. Hedberg states that this elusive goal is paramount to how and why they remain together and have such a high rate of retention among their members.

Deviation is an important element in their social cohesion. If someone transgresses the *Ordnung* it is a matter for the community because the salvation of the community is at stake. Hedberg shows, however, that deviation from the accepted way of life, rather than tearing at the fabric of the society works to make real the boundaries either physical or symbolic that facilitate the separation the Old Colony Mennonites from others.

She found that deviation is allowed and accepted if it is done in appropriate ways. For example, it is well known that young men go to the Izoceño-Guaraníe community nearby to drink, smoke and listen to recorded music, things which are against the *Ordnung*, or laws of the community. While they may be punished if they are caught, it is acceptable as long as it is done infrequently. As well, it is understood that it is something that they will stop when they become husbands and fathers. The deviation is 'appropriate' because this is 'the way things have always been done', like all other ways of being in the Old Colony. This appropriate deviation does not disturb the rules but instead by deviating they

expose what the rules are. And even though deviation occurs, she states that the majority maintain the status quo mostly through social control. The community controls behaviour by investing each member with the responsibility for the surveillance of other members.

Relations between the Old Colony Mennonite community and the Izoceño-Guaraníe people are much more varied than merely an outlet for deviant behaviour. Economic relations proliferate; they work and buy goods for and from one another. The fact that Old Colony Mennonites ascribe to non-conformity does not mean that they remain utterly isolated. However, their interactions while generally amiable and not without some degree of kindness, accentuate the differences since relations are mediated by a sense of the 'other.' The Bolivians are always understood as a different people with whom interactions are not acceptable beyond economic and friendly exchanges. She notes that there are limits to appropriate relations because of restrictions on becoming entangled in 'the world.'

Calvin Redekop, in his 1969 work on the Old Colony Mennonites in Chihuahua, Mexico, believed that Old Colony Mennonites would not likely survive in their present form. Hedberg, while not wanting to make predictions, believes the Mennonites in Durango will continue their way of life, perhaps in part because of the obstacles to that life, which force them to react further against 'the world.'

The book is rich in narration allowing the voices of the Old Colony Mennonites themselves to come through. It is an important work that presents new ideas on the workings of social cohesion, boundaries, social control and deviation. It also presents a significant contribution to scholarly literature on the Old Colony Mennonites.

by Tina Fehr Kehler
Winkler, Manitoba

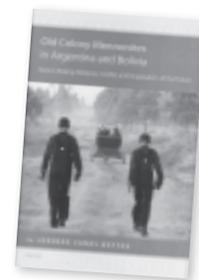
Old Colony Mennonites in Argentina and Bolivia: Nation Making, Religious Conflict and Imagination of the Future

Lorenzo Cañas Bottos, (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 216pp., ISBN: 978 90 04 16095 8.

At first glance, it is somewhat surprising to find a book written by a political anthropologist who teaches at a university in Estonia that has as its subject Old

Colony Mennonites in Bolivia and Argentina. Lorenzo Bottos teaches at the University of Tallinn in Estonia and his book offers a political analysis of what Bottos calls the

Old Colony "imagination of the future" (p.1). The book claims to challenge two tendencies of Mennonite insiders who have studied the Old Colony people. The first is



connected to the very idea of exploring an imagined future. According to Bottos, Old Colony people, like their Amish and Hutterite counterparts, have often been “perceived as if they lived in the past.” The second tendency that Bottos challenges is their frequent portrayal “as perfect examples of community” (p.2).

The book is not an easy one to read. To some extent the text is marred by unfortunate use of terminology. Most noticeable is the continuous reference to Old Colony church services as a mass. More importantly, however, the book is an academic project and frequently assumes understanding of political theory. It begins with a theoretical introduction, which is then followed by a chapter that uses the entire sweep of Mennonite history to make the case that early Anabaptist principles such as a believer’s church have been transformed in Old Colony practice to a situation where only those “born into a Mennonite family ...[are] expected to be baptized” (p.48). The sweep of history touches only briefly, however on the Manitoba story. That story is left to the next chapter, which explores the Old Colony Mennonite’s relations with the state. The result is a somewhat fragmented use of the past, a problem that occurs more often in Bottos’s sweeping use of history to make his point. The fragmented story of the predecessors of the Old Colony Mennonites of Argentina and Bolivia is due in part to his limited use of sources. There are important works on various aspects of Russian and Manitoba Mennonite history that Bottos seems unaware of. The work of Calvin Wall Redekop and John Warkentin, whose research dates to the 1950s are

relied on heavily, however Adolf Ens’s important study of the school questions that led to the migration to Mexico is not mentioned. Similar examples occur in the Russian Mennonite story. In spite of the selective use of the past, Bottos makes the interesting observation that for Old Colony Mennonites “migration was in fact a way of rejecting nationality” (p 70).

The final five chapters of the book leave history behind to focus on the fieldwork Bottos did while he was in Argentina. As he admits he was to a large extent excluded from the colonies and therefore looks at Old Colony life from “the margins” (p. xvi). In these chapters Bottos explores how new colonies are created by schisms and how they relate to each other. Other chapters are devoted to how Old Colonists control connections with outsiders, how they deal with wealth, poverty and suffering, their scriptural practices, and how they manage dissent and dissenters. The style of these chapters uses the technique of telling an anecdote based on field experience, which is then followed by analysis. These chapters make extensive use of a very limited number of contacts. Sergio, a non-Mennonite who wanted to join the colony and Abraham, and Old Colony Mennonite dissenter are central figures in the discussion of the theme of each chapter. Bottos effectively uses the detailed analysis of the interaction of these dissenters and outsiders to provide a careful explanation of the internal politics of Old Colony Mennonites.

Bottos conclusions are far reaching. Old Colony Mennonites have reshaped being ‘separate from the world’ into geographic reality. In this process they have created

organizational models and structures to relate to modern states and have reinforced their group identity by making baptism a routine rite of passage into adulthood and excommunication a tool of social control. In some cases excommunication itself has the potential to contribute to an alternative imagining of the future and the Old Colony leadership then resorts to isolation and “progressive expulsion” (p. 192) to quash these alternate imaginations. Modernity brought with it another tool that could be used to reinforce Old Colony separateness, the rejection of technology. Bottos also makes conclusions about the nation state from his analysis of Old Colony Mennonites. The nation state used Mennonites to consolidate its hold on geographic space, but Mennonites rejected the state’s inclusion of them into the nation. This rejection took form in negotiations, but also significantly in migrations where Mennonites used cross-border relationships to keep separate nationality from citizenship. Most dramatically, Bottos concludes that the Old Colony have created themselves as a nation, and the *Lehrdienst* (the Aeltester and Ministers) as a state.

Although a difficult book the author has found a way to explain in a detailed and novel way the developments that have created the Old Colony diaspora in Latin America. The reader knowledgeable of Mennonite history will wince occasionally, but the book offers us a fresh, outsider’s look at politics, Old Colony style.

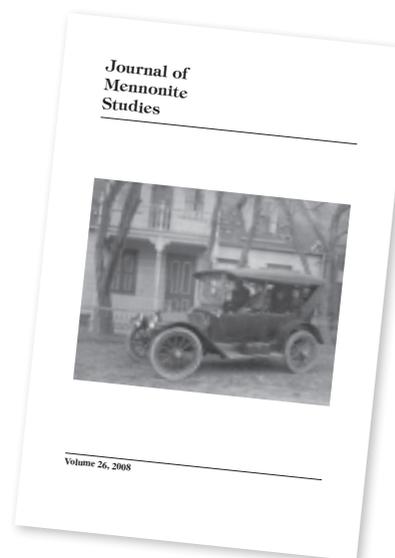
By Hans Werner
Winnipeg, Manitoba

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Letters

Our many readers continue to find *Preservings* interesting and a valuable contribution to telling the Mennonite story. Here is a sample of the letters received in response to the last issue.

April 14, 2008

Thank you for sending me *Preservings*. I really enjoy reading it. The articles are so interesting, so well written and informative. Keep up the good work, for we have such a rich treasure in our heritage.

In sincere appreciation,
Rudy Goerzen
Abbotsford, B.C.

April 9, 2008

Thanks for continuing *Preservings*. I find it most interesting. Both the theological and cultural articles are very informative.

Peter Goertzen
Medicine Hat, AB.

April 8, 2008

I received the #27 issue of *Preservings* and found it very interesting. I will be sharing it with others in our community of Grand Forks. ...

Thanks again, keep up with the good work.

Harold Funk

Our Mistake

In our last issue, *Preservings* 27 we exchanged the captions on the photographs of estates in Russia. The photo on page 35 is that of the Brodsky estate, property of the Dick (not Dyck) family (MHC 44-180). The estate pictured on page 36 is that of the Abram Wieler estate in the Kharkov area (MHC 44-121). The photograph on the back cover is that of the Voranaja estate belonging to Abram H. Bergman. We would like to thank the many readers who pointed out the error to us.

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Dear Friends:

With this mailing, the D.F. Plett Historical Research Foundation is pleased to be able to provide another issue of *Preservings*. Through it we hope to continue the vision of Delbert Plett to help readers better to understand and appreciate their Mennonite heritage. Our plans are to continue to produce *Preservings*.

There are of course considerable costs incurred in preparing, editing, printing and mailing this journal. We invite all readers to assist in covering the costs by subscribing on the form attached below. The subscription fee is \$20.00 per year.

We also invite you to contribute articles, biographies, or news. You may know of people whose story should be told in these pages. Maybe grandparents, relatives, or neighbours' stories would be of interest to our readers. Please contact us about writing such stories, or let us know who might be able to do so. We depend upon many willing writers for the content of the paper.

Blessings to you.
Sincerely,

John J. Friesen and Hans Werner, co-editors for *Preservings*

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The Bustillos Valley from the hill in the city of Cuauhémoc, 2008. Photo by Hans Werner.

The confusion and excitement of a new land. San Antonio de los Avenales, now Quauhiténoc, in 1923.

