“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
In this Issue

There is something about people who are nervous about new technologies that fascinates the world. People who use tractors with steel wheels, horses and buggies, do not have telephones in the home, or wear distinctively conservative dress are the object of the gaze of those who are modern.

Our feature article section in this issue sheds light on the practices of three different streams of conservatives. Diane Zimmerman Umble’s article from the mid 1990s helps us understand why installing a telephone in the home challenged Amish sensibilities of the importance of face-to-face interaction, of silence, of worship and of work. Jesse Hofer takes us inside Hutterite practices and struggles with the modern particularly with communication technology and competitive sport. Royden Loewen’s article looks broadly at the conservative impulses of Russian Mennonites who live south of the Rio Grande.

Our theme continues in a photo essay on the horse and buggy era and how pride of ownership played a role in deciding on the appropriate horse and buggy ornamentation that was permitted. There is also an article on the ‘Horse and Buggy’ conference held at the University of Winnipeg in October 2011 that explored the theme of anti-modern Mennonites. At the opposite pole, is Ralph Friesen’s account of how his father and companions travelled to the center of fundamentalism, how they drank deeply from the wells of North American evangelists, and how that experience contributed to the EMC move away from traditional conservatism.

Two articles focus on new research on the West Reserve. Glen Klassen and Conrad Stoesz expand earlier research on the 1918 flu epidemic (Preservings 28, 2008) with an interesting study of diphtheria while Bruce Wiebe builds on his research in Land Titles records with a study of towns like Haskett and Stephen, which remained only a dream or gradually faded away. Leonard Doell’s article goes farther afield in telling stories of Mennonite interaction with Canada’s Aboriginal people, primarily in Saskatchewan and Alberta. Doell suggests that Mennonites and Aboriginal people’s share a “sense of peoplehood and homeland.”

In this issue are also two accounts of pilgrimages to ancestral lands. Al Hamm’s account of a trip to Poland/Prussia is interesting in that his family did not participate in the Russian period before coming to Canada. Edwin Hoeppner’s trip was to Ukraine and chronicles his search for ancestors that included the delegate Hoeppner of the 18th century.

The story and sermon of Peter Shellenberg and the journal of Gerhard P. Goertzen offer insights into quite different experiences of migration; in the Shellenberg case from Manitoba to Saskatchewan in 1914, while Goertzen migrated from Russia to Mexico in the 1920s. Migration is also the theme of Bill Janzen’s reflection on his years working on behalf of Mennonites from Mexico and their ability to return to Canada.

The year has witnessed the loss of some important contributors to keeping alive the Mennonite story. We briefly remember the contributions of Gerhard Ens, Adalbaert Goertz and Judith Martens. All left us in the last year.

Hans Werner, co-editor

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There is considerable diversity among the descendants of the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century. Many have adopted modernity wholesale, others are at the extreme opposite end of the spectrum using horses and buggies and managing without electricity and the technology that its availability has stimulated. It is readily apparent that for the most part the objection to modern things among conservatives centers on the principle that the Christian is to be ‘in, but not of’ the world. Additionally, in contrast to what I will refer to here as ‘modern’ Christians, the conservatives worry much more about the effect of technology on the Christian community, on their ability to contemplate God, on appropriate relations within the family, on the temptation to sin. The sacrifices made by conservatives are unfathomable to modern Christians, so are they wrong? Are they to be scorned and their views and practices relegated to artifacts of an irrelevant past?

It is readily apparent that conservative Mennonites embrace what can only be considered to be contradictory choices. They adopt technology in some forms, but reject it in others. They maintain 17th century forms of dress, while in some cases use computers and the internet, they drive horses and buggies, but need trucks and cars to travel longer distances; and the list could go on. They are accused of being tradition-bound, steeped in ethnicity, and hence even non-Christian.

Those of us who are modern Mennonites might do well to take lessons from our conservative sisters and brothers. The conservative Mennonites have held true to some of the 16th century Anabaptist understandings that modern Mennonites have rejected. They emphasize separation from the world. To characterize their skepticism of technology as simply ‘backward’ is too simple. Conservative Mennonites are fully aware that some of their reasons for rejecting modernity serve mainly to maintain identification markers. Not adopting modern forms of dress serves as a marker for their separateness rather than having intrinsic theological value. Their example offers a critique of modern Mennonites, who while often talking about being counter-cultural look more like they are falling all over themselves to adapt the church to the ways of the North American world.

One might also argue that the conservatives have consistently rejected the institutional church that has been built up by Mennonites over the last seventy-five years. Modern Mennonites have created an institutional church on a grand scale. Church schools, conferences, debates, motions and amendments, councils and committees, minutes, democratic governance, hired pastors, secretaries, and the list goes on. The conservative church is relational. It does not rely on the structures used in the world to govern organizations, but rather relates in face-to-face conversations and the constantly evolving, never formal, but always powerful sense of how the Christian community ought to live—the _Ordnung_. Ironically perhaps, a new generation of modern Mennonites is seemingly distancing itself from the institutional church created by their parents. Across the Mennonite church landscape the highly structured aspect of the church seems to be in trouble. The trend is toward the local, giving to conferences is in decline, there are on the one hand increasing numbers of diverse smaller and intimate churches, while on the other hand serious inroads are being made by the large ‘big box’ churches with few institutional ties, but emphasizing dynamic and often authoritarian local leadership.

The quiet piety of conservative Mennonites seems also to offer instruction for modern Mennonites. The modern Mennonite world is a noisy, self-absorbed world. The modern emphasizes being able to pray out loud using certain words, to sing with drums and guitars with the words projected on the wall, or to do so artistically in four-part harmony; using the right words: ‘being born again’, confronting the government over social justice, foreign policy, and environmental issues. At the same time those who live a quieter, simpler piety are the focus of mission efforts that have as much to do with making them modern as bringing them closer to Jesus.

To be sure, conservative Mennonites do not live in a utopia, in fact they are often less able to hide their sins from the watchful eyes of a sensation-hungry media. But modern Mennonites have too often approached them with nothing to learn. The tables should be turned. Modern Mennonites do not need to all become conservatives, but the conservatives should be given the respect they deserve. To pause and reflect on their quiet piety, strong sense of family and community, and their skepticism of what is new in the world, might stand us in good stead.

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The Telephone Debates

The Old Order Amish in North America have engaged in ongoing debates about how and where to draw the line on telephone use. At the turn of the century, the debates focused on whether or not to allow telephones in the home. Within the first decade of the new century the Old Order Amish Ordnung, or code of conduct, banned telephones but stopped short of prohibiting telephone use. The decision was a painful one and became entangled in a church split in the Lancaster settlement in 1910. The debates today center on appropriate use of telephones and telephone technologies in Amish businesses as well as the use of loud call bells, flashing lights, toll free numbers, fax machines, answering machines, voice mail and cellular telephones.

The telephone negotiations represent Amish struggles to manage social change and ensure economic survival while at the same time maintaining traditional values of humility, simplicity, and separation from the world. Rules about appropriate telephone use attempt to preserve the boundary between the Amish community and the outside world. In addition, telephone rules also serve to mark the boundaries distinguishing traditional from more liberal Amish groups. Groups that permit telephones in the home serve as negative reference groups for the Old Order Amish, thereby strengthening their resolve to hold to traditional standards.

The ongoing negotiations about appropriate uses of the telephone have led to an interesting array of telephone practices. In recent years, the pressure for access to telephones has increased with the growth of Amish-owned businesses. The rules vary from church district to church district and from settlement to settlement across North America. Some districts permit telephones in or adjacent to a shop. Others maintain that telephones must be outside and separate from the shop. Some bishops encourage their members to use public telephones at mills, stores, and other public places. In Ontario, a telephone is located in an Amish schoolhouse. In the Big Valley settlement in Mifflin County, Pennsylvania, the Amish often use telephones owned by their non-Amish neighbors. In Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, telephone shanties, scattered throughout the countryside, are shared by several families in a particular neighborhood. These “community” telephones have unlisted numbers, and calls are recorded and paid for on an honor system.

In Ohio, shared telephones are often pay phones. Many Ohio Amish use telephone credit cards to pay for long-distance calls, a practice that is less common in the Lancaster settlement. One district may prohibit loud call bells on the telephone, while another may permit such bells. The bishop in one district may object to telephone answering machines, but permit the use of an answering service. The most conservative group of Old Order Amish, the Swartzentrubers, avoid using the telephone except in cases of emergency. While these practices reflect various compromises, they maintain the ban on telephones in homes that was grafted into the Ordnung in the early years of the new century. That historic prohibition provides the context for the contemporary debates over the telephone.

In order to understand the contemporary compromises on telephone access, it is important to understand how and why the telephone came to be banned from the Amish home. The decision against home telephones is best understood by situating the telephone debates within the larger context of communication practices. Amish social rituals structure communication to serve ethnic boundary maintenance.

Rituals of Communication and Boundary Maintenance

At the turn of the century, communication in Old Order communities was organized in and through the rituals of community life and anchored in the home. Worship, work, and socializing all revolved around the home. Births, funerals, and weddings occurred at home. The home was the hub...
of faith and life. It was the scene of face-to-face, often non-verbal, highly contextualized communication. The home was also a refuge from the complexities and the temptations of the outside world. Old Order rituals of worship, silence, work, and visiting knit individuals into the fabric of community life and also articulated and nurtured community boundaries. Changes in communication patterns, like the introduction of the telephone, challenged traditional definitions and reordered the taken-for-granted notions about who had access to whom, when and where. In the Amish experience, the introduction of the telephone threatened to disrupt the harmony of the community. The telephone threatened to disrupt key social rituals of worship, silence, work and visiting.

Amish worship services are held biweekly in the home. The three-and-a-half hour service in the Pennsylvania dialect includes slow singing, silent prayers, scripture readings, and two sermons. The services ritually express the spirit of Gelassenheit, the collective expression of submission and yieldedness. The individual is integrated into and finds expression in the collective activities of waiting, silence, listening, and unison singing.

Communion services in particular mark who is in or out of fellowship and clarify behaviors that are deemed appropriate and inappropriate. Each fall and spring, church leaders meet to discuss issues facing the church. If problems develop (as happened with the introduction of the telephone), communion is postponed until the social harmony can be assured. If individuals resist discipline, they can be expelled. In the preparation for communion as well as in the service itself, individuals renew their commitment to the church, to its rules of behavior, and to each other twice a year. Membership in the community is affirmed, social relationships are repaired, and deviants are expelled. In the process, a common understanding of expected behavior is clarified and community boundaries are reinforced.

Woven throughout the restoration and maintenance of community is a discourse of silence. Amish worship services begin in silence, and periods of silence are interspersed throughout the service. Silence is also a means of negotiating social relationships. It can communicate submission or disapproval. Shunning is the active application of enforced silence for reproof, in the hope that sustained ostracism will restore communication. The Amish also use silence to confront conflicts with the wider culture. Since their beginning, the Amish have upheld prohibitions against taking loyalty oaths, filing lawsuits, and participating in military service. Even faith requires little verbal articulation. From the Amish point of view, the maintenance of a redemptive community is their witness. The common “life” speaks for itself. Silent discourse binds its participants together in a stream of taken-for-granted understandings about what needs to be said and what can remain unspoken. The Amish use of silence, like worship, actively reaffirms and restores community identity and marks off community boundaries.

Work rituals also express community identification. Sandra Cronk says that Old Order people view work as a redemptive ritual, a calling from God. It is pursued for the sake of building and maintaining the community, not for profit or prestige. A family working together on the farm celebrates togetherness and affirms the usefulness of every member of the family. They work together in the house, in the garden, in the barn, and in the fields. Every member, young and old, contributes according to his or her ability. Farm work integrates the family and keeps workers near home in the context of family and community influence. Work patterns at the turn of the twentieth century were governed by the pace and rhythm of the seasons. Recent shifts in occupational patterns have changed work rituals within the Amish community. Work is no longer anchored in the home for many Amish persons.

Old Order Amish visiting rituals allow for regular and extensive communication as a part of worship, work, and, on many other occasions, visiting for its own sake. Worship services are followed by a shared meal that provides the occasion for sharing community news. Shared work also facilitates opportunities for socializing. Work “frolics” bring together extended family and friends to share tasks ranging from house cleaning and quilting to butchering and barn raisings. The “off” Sundays, when worship services are not scheduled, are also devoted to visiting. Informal visiting is routine and extensive among friends and family, both far and near. Frequent visiting strengthens community ties by maintaining a high level of interpersonal awareness and understanding among members. Visiting nurtures belonging, enhances social relations within the community, and funnels communication within ethnic boundaries.

Through communication patterns, Amish communities provide their members with common values, beliefs, rituals, and histories that mark who belongs and who does not, thus providing stability and identity. Rules and rituals about how to communicate, who can communicate with whom, under what circumstances, and about what—all function to construct, reproduce, and repair social boundaries and identities. The rituals of worship, of silence, of work, and of visiting articulate and maintain Old Order orientations within the boundaries of community. The efficacy of these rituals rests on face-to-face, often nonverbal communication; communication that most often occurs at home.

The Coming of the Telephone

With the coming of the telephone, rituals that served to strengthen the identity of an integrated and separated community were challenged. Telephones demanded verbal expression. The telephone mediated face-to-face communication, disrupted social harmony, threatened to change visiting patterns, and intruded into the home.

In the mind of Lancaster’s Old Order Amish, the telephone was a principal issue behind the 1910 division of the Lancaster settlement that resulted in the loss of nearly one-fifth of the members. Prior to 1910, Amish leaders had taken no firm position on the telephone. Certain Amish families had telephones in their homes. They were connected by homemade lines that linked farm families in the immediate neighborhood on party lines.

Farmers’ lines were commonplace in rural areas across the country. Local newspapers often carried accounts describing how such lines could be built with wire, fence posts, and a simple battery operated telephone box. Farmers used these makeshift party lines to communicate with their neighbors long before telephone companies provided service to rural areas. Oral sources in both Pennsylvania and Ohio suggest the while some Amish families had these telephones, most were not connected to organized telephone companies at the time.

One Amish man described the decision-making process in Pennsylvania: “our ministers have a conference every year, and
what they think should be or what they think shouldn’t be, they counsel over it. And then the church people are supposed to listen…” When a few families installed telephones, the telephone question came before the church leaders. Conflicting views over telephones created disunity in the Lancaster community prior to communion. The Amish man went on to explain what happened when the telephone issue came to a head in 1910:

and these people that had the phone, one said to the other, “What are you going to do? Are you going to put yours away?” One said, “I’m going to wait to see what the ministers come up with.” And the other one said, “I’m not going to put mine away.” So it caused a division in the church….

Most Amish accounts of the events of 1909 and 1910 are oral. One of the few published accounts, written by an Old Order Amish man born in 1897, reflects common themes in the story:

About 1909 the phone lines were put up thru [sic] the country and our Amish people at least some got them and it did not seem to make any trouble, then a couple of women got to talking about another woman over the phone and this woman also had the phone in and had the receiver down and heard what they said, this made quite a stink and at last came into the gma [congregation] to get it straightened out, then the Bishops and ministers made out if that is the way they are going to be used we would better not have them. Some were willing to put them away and others were not so that is when the King gma [the splinter group] started, the telephone was one of the issues but I suppose there were some more.10

Whether the catalyst was the stubbornness of the men, or the gossip of the women, there was dissension within the community over the telephone. An Old Order Amish historian writes that the 1910 split was caused by “different views in church discipline, most concerning newly invented contraptions that our conservative church leaders could not tolerate.”11

In the fall of 1909, when the ministers met to discuss issues facing the community in preparation for fall communion, telephone ownership and the sanction of shunning were on the agenda. After joint consultations with ministers from another county, the Lancaster leaders announced their intentions to hold to the “old order” of their forebears. Their position was explained in preparatory services across the district. They reiterated support for shunning unfaithful members, even those who left the Amish church to join nearby Mennonite churches. And they stated that the telephone had no place in the Amish home. Thus in the fall of 1909 a ban on home telephones was grafted into the Ordnung in the Lancaster settlement. Other settlements also instituted prohibitions against home telephones, usually without incident. In 1914, one Iowa congregation divided over the telephone. Many Old Order Mennonite groups across North America also had telephone troubles within their congregations.12

While Old Order Amish accounts are primarily oral, some accounts have been written by descendants of those who left the Amish church in the 1910 division.13 Known today as the Beachy Amish, they attribute the Lancaster split to disagreements over strict applications of shunning. In their written histories, the Beachys hold that the division was precipitated by the refusal of progressive-minded members to shun those who left the Amish church for a Mennonite church.14 The Old Order Amish upheld the ban on members who had joined a Mennonite church.15

At the time of this controversy telephone companies were growing rapidly across the country. Nearly one-quarter of all American homes had telephones by 1909. By 1912, more farm than nonfarm households had telephones.16 Telephone advertising aggressively promoted telephones as a “highway” to the world, the “modern way to save one’s time and temper.” The Intercourse Telephone Company was founded in the heart of Lancaster’s Amish settlement in the summer of 1909. It was connected to the Bell Telephone’s trunk lines several months later and by the fall of 1909 it was possible for local persons to talk with “the outside world.” The Intercourse Company, consisting of a feisty group of progressive businessmen, carried on a public feud, in the local newspaper, with neighboring New Holland over the granting of franchise to connect lines between the two towns. The Amish virtues of humility and submission were not noticeable characteristics of their aggressive business posture.

To its proponents, the telephone was the hallmark of the progressive farmer, or the efficient businessman, doctor, or lawyer. It was hailed for providing efficient access to current information: market reports, weather reports, transportation schedules. The telephone facilitated business by preventing
unnecessary trips to town. Emergencies could be handled quickly by telephone. Some advocates even saw telephones as instruments of “divine service.”17

The Amish were not blind to the benefits of the telephone. But for them it symbolized a desire to be connected to the larger world. Telephone communication could not easily be monitored or mediated by the rhythms and rituals of community life. The Amish explain that telephone communication was understood to be individualistic, making possible private links with outside sources of information. Telephone service created new business affiliations through the formations of farmers’ mutual lines and later telephone companies. Telephone conversations often forced Amish persons to converse in English instead of the Pennsylvania German dialect. People were tempted to use the telephone in ways that could not be monitored in the ethnic community.

The telephone also provided temptations to gossip, “spooning,” and other mischief. Visiting over the telephone was not an effective substitute for the monitoring of behavior that traditionally took place in the face-to-face context of community. The telephone required verbal expression, which undermined the practice of silence. And when the telephone caused problems in relationships among church members, it disrupted the harmony of the community. Finally, the telephone had the potential to disturb the pace and style of work routines. The Amish today suggest that telephones get in the way of work. Telephones have the potential to extract the worker from the context of shared work. They are not only a means of communication, but a source of interruption and distraction as well.

The negative perceptions of the telephone and the debates swirling about its use reveal concerns about the blurring of boundaries between the community and the outside world. The telephone was not a benign gadget. The Amish doubted its divine qualities. Its use intruded into established patterns of communication and potentially could reorganize a larger set of communication practices. The telephone made community boundaries permeable to new information and new ways of behaving. For better or for worse, the telephone was a direct link to the outside world. Old Order rituals of worship, silence, work and visiting effectively articulated ethnic boundaries of the Old Order community. The coming of the telephone threatened to disrupt these historic rituals and extract communication from the control of the religious community.

Contemporary Struggles

Since banning the telephones from homes in 1910, Amish leaders have tried to maintain the primacy of communication within the context of community. For the next twenty years, the Amish upheld the telephone ban. If access to a telephone was necessary, they travelled to a public telephone or used a neighbor’s telephone.

In the mid thirties, several Amish families made an appeal to church leaders for a shared telephone. They argued that access to a telephone was important in times of emergency—calling a doctor, or the fire company. “It was tolerated,” according to an Amish leader, “and that was the beginning of the ‘community phone.’ They had a phone in someone’s building, but it had to be taken out and put into a phone shanty like the ones we have today.”18

In the intervening years, community phone shanties have gradually appeared throughout the Lancaster County settlement. Some Amish explain that community phones became necessary because non-Amish neighbors did not appreciate the “barn and tobacco smells” that trailed Amish persons who came to “borrow” a telephone. Others cite economic reasons. Amish dairy farmers in some settlements began using artificial breeding. To maintain their herds, they needed faster access to the inseminator and the veterinarian than the postal service provided. The Amish also explain that medical doctors no longer held open office hours and appointments were necessary. Community telephones thus provided relatively quick access to these outside services.

Community telephones are carefully managed by church leaders. Some Amish families report that they ask permission before installing a telephone shanty. Others simply install one without asking. In the beginning, the telephones were shared, usually by five to seven families. Today often two or three families in some districts share a phone, depending on the population density. Telephone shanties or telephones in outbuildings have become increasingly common in the Lancaster settlement. Several Amish persons report that “almost everyone” has access to a telephone these days.

Numbers are usually unlisted and the telephone is primarily used for outgoing calls. Loud call bells to announce incoming calls are discouraged or prohibited. Moreover the telephones are separate from the house. Kraybill reports one grandfather’s descriptions of the expectations: “If you have a place of business and need a phone it must be separate from the building, and if it’s on the farm it must be separate from the house. It should be shared with the public so that others can use it. It’s just not allowed in the house, where would it stop? We stress keeping things small and keeping the family together.”19

Economic pressures today have fostered a new round of debates about telephones. In response to dwindling supplies of farmland, Amish families have developed small businesses in carpentry, light manufacturing, foods, and the like—businesses that often serve both the needs of the Amish community and the general public. About 50 percent of the men eighteen and older in the Lancaster settlement work in nonfarming jobs. Similar trends have been documented in other settlements. In Holmes County, Ohio, a 1981 study found that only 42 percent of the heads of households were involved in full-time farming. Twenty-eight percent were involved in carpentry, construction, and the trades, while the remaining 21 percent held factory jobs.20 In Indiana 43 percent held factory jobs and only 37 percent were engaged in farming in 1988.21

The growth of small businesses is accompanied by demands for a variety of new technologies. Amish entrepreneurs argue

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that access to the telephone is now a necessity for running a business. Permission to have telephones in the shop varies from district to district, depending on the thinking of the local bishop. In one case, an Amish businessman argued that he needed a telephone exclusively for business purposes. The bishop's reply: "It's either a community telephone or no phone at all."

The emphasis on shared telephones sometimes costs both time and money. An Amish man from Indiana describes a "community telephone house" recently built by an Amish neighbor. It was a "major investment." He estimates that his neighbor spent about six hundred dollars on the building and then had to pay another seven hundred and fifty dollars to the telephone company to install a pay phone. His neighbor runs a small business and uses the telephone for business purposes. Other Amish neighbors can use the phone as well. They pay a quarter for local calls and use telephone credit cards for long-distance calls. Proceeds from the telephone go to the man who installed it.

Sometimes solutions to logistical problems associated with community telephones can be solved with creative use of technology. In Ohio, a roadside telephone serves a small Amish business and an estimated twenty to twenty-four Amish families. So many people were using the phone that business cards could not be made or received. Now two lines are connected to this roadside phone. One line is connected to an answering machine that receives messages for the Amish business. The other is for use of the members of the Amish community who need to make calls.

In Pennsylvania an Amish woman describes the "voice box" service they have at the telephone behind their house. By paying three dollars a month to the telephone company, the three families who share this telephone (and manage two family businesses) have programmed their phone to receive recorded messages after fourteen rings. On a regular basis they retrieve messages by dialing a special identification number. "Having a recording machine attached to the phone would probably be discouraged," she says, "but since this service is offered through the telephone company, it's alright."

Virtually all Amish businesses in the Lancaster County settlement have some type of access to a telephone, either in a shanty or adjacent to the shop. A few have toll-free numbers. While fax machines are prohibited, Amish entrepreneurs do not hesitate to use one accessible in a nearby non-Amish office. Some Amish businessmen have entered into partnerships with non-Amish partners in order to circumvent prohibitions on new technologies.

Cellular telephones are also prohibited in the Lancaster settlement. However, one occasionally hears about someone who discretely keeps a cellular phone in a desk drawer. Some businesses use vehicles equipped with mobile telephones or radios that are leased by non-Amish employees or partners. While church leaders have tolerated the increased use of telecommunications for the sake of economic viability, the compromises are not without their ambiguities. Sometimes it is difficult to know where to draw the line on specific telephone practices.

One line is that telephones are to be used only when "necessary." Businesses are permitted to install telephones with the understanding that they are available to members of the community as necessary. But the distinction between necessity and socializing is often blurred. Most Amish persons repeat the directive that the telephone is not to be used for visiting. Nevertheless, Amish women report that they regularly use the telephone to keep in touch with family members who live at a distance. One Amish woman granted that she probably uses the phone more since they installed one "out back." She calls both family members and non-Amish friends on a regular basis.

Another rule that is often violated is the expectation that community telephones will be used strictly for outgoing calls. Many people admit to prearranging a time to receive telephone calls. One woman regularly arranges a time to receive calls from her siblings in a mid-western settlement. Day laborers often receive calls at their places of employment.

In the past, it was expected that telephone numbers would be unlisted. Recently, however, Amish business directories are beginning to include the number of a telephone answering service or suggest the best hours to place calls to a phone shanty. One Amish woman confided that she and her husband had recently decided to list their number in the public telephone directory, because it was "just too expensive" to pay the additional twelve dollars a month to keep the number unlisted.

In recent years, telephone access has increased across most of the Amish settlements in North America. The Lancaster settlement leads in the proliferation of shop telephones and telephone shanties. Kraybill has described the continuum of telephone use in Ohio. The most conservative groups use public telephones or borrow a neighbor's telephone. The Old Order affiliation uses private telephones at the property line as well as public telephones. About a third of the New Order districts have begun permitting telephones in the home. In general, the smaller, rural, farm-oriented settlements have experienced less pressure for business telephones.

The trend toward increased and easier access to the telephone is not without its critics. Articles in the Amish magazine Family Life speak to the ambivalence about the telephone. In an article entitled "Choice of Two Evils" ("Choice" 1976:13) a husband and wife discuss which is worse, having their own telephone or continually pestering their neighbors to use their phone. After a visit to friends who have a home telephone, Fred and Saloma are disgruntled by the interruptions, teens talking on the phone, and the reliance on the telephone for every little thing. The writer attempts to delineate what is "necessary" and "appropriate" telephone use: calls strictly for business that cannot be handled by mail, or for emergencies. The writer discourages "gossiping" and "unnecessary" calling. Near the end of the story Fred wonders about their friends:
“will their children be able to see the dangers in having these things which are so handy if the parents make use of them so much as they do?”

Concern about the impact on the next generation is reiterated in another Family Life story, “Only One Step.” Paul comes home frustrated over the inconvenience of going to the service station to use the pay phone. Lydia, his wife, senses that his frustration is symptomatic of his deeper dissatisfaction with the church. In the course of the story, the young couple visits with an older couple who left the church years earlier to join a more liberal group. The older couple laments that they have lost their four children “into the world.” The older man confesses: “What else could be expected, since we had already taken a step in that direction? … To us it seems the plainer churches still afford the best shelter from all the evils of the world. …” Some time later, Lydia finds her husband in the barn loft tormented in prayer. In tears, he admits that he was wrong in his criticism of the church rules. In the end, Paul says, “Giving up was the hardest part. But now I see that it was one small step, too—but this time a step in the right direction.” Instead of moving away from the traditions of the church, he was ready to embrace them in humility.24

These two stories illustrate how struggles over access to the telephone are seen as struggles of the faith. The anonymous writers equate dissatisfaction over telephone prohibitions with willfulness and pride. Readers are challenged to weigh the consequences of handy access to the telephone for the faithfulness of the next generation.

A forty-seven-year-old Amish man echoes the concern about the long-term impact. He says that it may not be the phone in and of itself that causes young people to leave the church. “But one thing leads to another, and so you have this drift. … If you get that spirit in a group in a generation or two, pretty soon it becomes uncontrollable.” He calls the trend “uncontrollable drift,” and it worries him. Handy access to the telephone is viewed as one small step down a road that leads to a loss of faith in the next generation.

Endnotes
3. Kraybill, Riddle, 150.
5. For extensive descriptions of Amish worship practices from an anthropologi-
Hutterites and Modernity

Jesse Hofer, Silver Winds Community, Sperling, MB

Introduction

Like many religious communities, Hutterites are wrestling with challenges posed by modernity. For much of their history, geographical separation provided a measure of distance between Hutterites and the influences of their host societies. However, with changing business practices and increased access to media and digital technologies, Hutterites in the twenty-first century have increasingly encountered ideas and practices different from their own, including those of modernity. While there is much about Hutterite life that is out of step with modernity, there are many areas where we have drunk quite freely, albeit selectively, from its heady waters.

“Modernity” names a complex worldview with various ideas and practices, but one of its central characteristics is its disdain for the wisdom of tradition mediated by a community. Instead, the modern person prides himself as an independent creature, who determines his own ethics and directs his own affairs. In short, modernity tends to exalt the individual and undermine the role of the community.

From their beginnings in the sixteenth century to the present, Hutterites have resisted the temptation toward various forms of individualism. They have been able to preserve their unique expression of community by relying on a rich deposit of biblical teachings and by selectively accepting aspects of modernity that are compatible with their religious beliefs. By honoring the biblical underpinnings of their faith and valuing the wisdom of their traditional ways, Hutterites continue to find ways of negotiating modernity in areas such as education, technology, material culture, dress, and economics.

The Hutterite Deposit of Faith

Perhaps one of the most persistent Hutterite disavowals of modernity is their reverence for and use of a collection of traditional sermons or teachings. If you were to attend a Hutterite church service today you would not hear the exposition and interpretation of the Scriptures by a seminary-trained pastor, but the reading of a Lehr (teaching) written several hundred years ago by a Hutterite Servant of the Word elected from the local congregation. The teachings explore a biblical text by drawing extensively on Scripture, with commentary adding details from history, nature and daily life. The text for the week is introduced at the Sunday service and continued throughout the week at daily half-hour church services held before the supper meal. A pattern or lectionary determines which teaching is used for a particular Sunday or holiday.

The job of the minister is to clarify, apply and contextualize the message of the teachings to address contemporary issues and concerns. Traditionally, part of his training was to copy the sermons by hand during the long winter evenings. Writing, reading and studying the teachings over a lifetime
allowed the minister to internalize their ethos and use it as a resource for dealing with daily, practical concerns arising in the community. The teachings have a timeless quality because they address themes that are common to Christians across time: relationships between people, the importance of faith demonstrated through good works, the folly of a godless life, and the blessedness of a godly life.

Animating this practice of reading time-honoured teachings is the belief that they articulate the vision of communal living faithfully embodied by generations of Hutterites. Especially significant is the fact that the teachings were written during times of persecution, when the price of discipleship was high, and faith tended to be authentic. Not only are the teachings an insistent biblical guideline for a life together, they also give witness to a spirit of faithfulness that has allowed this radical and beautiful life to be transmitted to the present. On several occasions, Hutterites who had given up practicing community of goods were both challenged and inspired by their teachings to restore the ancient apostolic practice. While the theologies of many minority religious groups have changed with the winds of mainstream culture and the theological whims of the day, Hutterites have been able to maintain a consistency in biblical message and interpretation, grounded on the principle of love expressed through the practice of community of goods.

In addition to the teachings, Hutterites are heir to a detailed written record of their history. Begun in the 1560s by Caspar Braitmichel and faithfully carried on by a succession of Hutterite elders and scribes, these Chronicles have been an indispensable resource for discernment for Hutterites from the earliest days of the movement to the present. Significantly, the chroniclers consciously connected the Hutterite story with the larger biblical story beginning with creation, suggesting that the content of history, both in its biblical and extra-biblical forms, is worthy of careful reflection and obedient following. It is quite common for the elder or senior ministers to refer to the Chronicle record to demonstrate the integrity of a given decision, or to consider how the ancestors dealt with a particular issue.

One incident in particular demonstrates how Hutterites relied on their internal historical account to guide the decisions of the community. In the first part of the eighteenth century Hutterites living in Transylvania (present-day Romania) had given up community of goods due to religious persecution. When a group of crypto-Protestants from the Austrian province of Carinthia arrived in the area as religious refugees looking for work and a place to settle, they were very interested in the Hutterite teachings and began to inquire about their unique beliefs. After several years of contact, these Carinthians were the catalyst for a rebirth for community of goods in 1757. Significantly, the Hutterite teachings emphasizing community of goods had been a pivotal factor leading to the conversion of the Carinthians and equipping the group for a renewal of the communal vision.

However, as one might expect, the new converts brought with them different religious ideas and spiritual practices. For instance, a brother from the Carinthian refugee group, named Matthias Hofer, advocated a different way of praying. Instead of praying publicly during church services, he argued that the minister and all present should pray silently; in fact, he asserted that it was wrong to pray publicly. After Matthias created considerable upheaval and confusion in the brotherhood concerning the question of prayer, the elders held counsel by searching the Chronicles for an orderly pattern of worship, trusting that the forefathers had followed the biblical model. They learned how worship services were organized in the early days and the traditional pattern was reestablished. Today, Hutterites still pray and worship in a manner very similar to that long-standing order.
Discerning Change or Negotiating Modernity

Both the Matthias Hofer story and many others from our Chronicles, as well as my own experiences growing up, suggest the important role tradition has for informing Hutterite belief and practice. Any discernment about important changes in the community occurs against the backdrop of the influence exerted by the Lehren, the Chronicles and other theological resources such as the Rechenschaft written by Peter Riedemann. The practical guidelines that result from deliberations over change are the Ordnungen. Both the process of discernment and the resulting Ordnungen vary considerably from community to community, although there are also Ordnungen that are recognized by all communities. Two areas of accommodation I would like to explore in some detail are the use of technological devices and the gradual acceptance of hockey as a recreational activity in my community.

Twenty years ago, certain technological devices and recreational practices were clearly taboo. Ministers met annually to negotiate the boundaries of these tools and practices in the form of directives or Ordnungen. In particular, radios were forbidden because they brought unwanted voices and influences to our communities. I can remember certain times, usually around Easter, when the community traditionally went through a process of reflection, reconciliation and rededication. It was during this time when our family brought its radio to the minister for disposal. When new vehicles were purchased they were either ordered without the radio, or the radio was disconnected upon arrival. Of course, there were always some radios around, but they were not officially sanctioned and were used secretly.

Similarly, playing ice hockey was not an acceptable form of recreation at this time. We were allowed to play many other sports such as soccer, baseball and volleyball; we were even permitted to play hockey on snow packed roadways with minimal equipment. To play the forbidden version on ice with skates and protective equipment, we would secretly trek several kilometers to a creek where we shoveled snow by hand, and laced our skates in the ice-cold winter air as we sat on the snow banks that were our boards. I remember many a game being interrupted by the need to search for a puck lost in the bulrushes. Occasionally, we were caught walking to the pond or back, and sometimes our equipment was confiscated.

Those were the days when the leadership was very guarded and very conservative about the ideas and practices that were permitted. New technologies and worldly habits were frowned upon and viewed with suspicion, since they inevitably disturbed traditional forms of life and brought ideas that clashed with our communal ethos. I do not recall a lot of discussion about why these devices or practices were to be avoided. When it was talked about, it was defended as a necessary measure to avoid bringing the “world” to the community. The parameters were simply accepted and understood to be in the best interests of the community.

Today, much has changed about how we deal with new technologies and where we draw the line with forms of recreation such as hockey. However, it is important to recognize that the process and level of discernment varies significantly from one Hutterite community to the next. Our community is fairly progressive on many levels, including both technology use and recreation. We use computers at work and at school. We play a variety of sports in a variety of venues, including a gymnasium, a hockey rink, and a large field of grass with various equipment. How do we manage the ‘i’ element of consumer-oriented digital media culture?

For many years Hutterites embraced technologies when they generated clear economic benefits for the community, while regulating media and technologies designed for entertainment purposes and personal use. For my community, this distinction is not as clear any longer, although a lingering nervousness still exists about the use of digital media for entertainment purposes. Today, we tend to recognize both the positive and negative potential posed by the new digital tools.

There are several levels of communal and church discernment that has helped us deal with the challenges of the digital revolution. For the most part, the Schmiedeleut Group I segment of the church has allowed individual communities to practice local discernment on the issue of technology. In my community, we have had several meetings where parents and youth have discussed how best to manage the use of computers and the Internet. One guideline that came out of these meetings was to avoid putting computers in bedrooms, or private spaces, where their use cannot be monitored. Instead, our youth access the Internet at the community school, in a space where there is greater transparency and accountability. Internet access is only available, with some exceptions for business purposes, in the workplace and at school. Only baptized members have cell phones.

Our school has organized a session where parents learned about the different technologies their children were either using or might be exposed to elsewhere. Only adults have Internet accounts protected by passwords where content is controlled by internally administered software filters. Occasionally, the hours logged online are compared and publically discussed as a further measure of accountability. To foster a healthy family, social life, and an active youth, our Internet service has been programmed to shut off at 9:00 pm. Finally, our teachers and Servants of the Word regularly reinforce these guidelines in their instruction, and recognize the need for ongoing discernment concerning the wise use of technology.

Beyond our local community, the topic of technology has been a recurring theme at our annual German school meetings. I have personally been involved in several forums and presentations that have explored what the emerging digital technologies mean for our life together. For instance, in October 2010 I teamed up with a colleague to present on the topic of “Technology and Community,” where we discussed the nature of directives or Rechenschaft and other theological Chronicles that are clearly taboo. Ministers met annually to negotiate the boundaries of these tools and practices in the form of directives or Ordnungen. In particular, radios were forbidden because they brought unwanted voices and influences to our communities. This was talked about, it was defended as a necessary measure to avoid bringing the “world” to the community. The parameters were simply accepted and understood to be in the best interests of the community.

How do we negotiate the boundaries of the seemingly boundless possibilities offered by technological gadgets? How do we manage the ‘i’ element of consumer-oriented digital media culture?

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of technological change, and considered how technologies have impacted our life already, for better and for worse. While different communities are responding differently to the challenges presented by digital technologies, all are drawing boundaries by listening, to one degree or another, to traditional wisdom, to the voices and concerns of the community members, and to the day-to-day experiences of the present.

Hockey is another area where our community has made significant changes in its policy and practice since I was a child. Today, my community supports, both financially and morally, a hockey rink and the necessary equipment and resources to play the sport every winter. This is a fairly radical change from twenty years ago. However, there are some aspects of hockey that my community does not approve. Playing hockey in arenas in nearby towns is frowned upon, as is competition between teams from different communities. Whenever a colony visits, or we visit another colony, we mix up the players so there are players from both colonies on each team. There are, however, some colonies that play against other colonies.

Also, attending sporting events such as a Winnipeg Jets game is a practice that my community does not support. Hockey is acceptable as a recreational activity on the community grounds, but as an entertainment form beyond the community, it is out of bounds. In contrast to the discernment process around questions related to technology use, the issues related to the boundaries of recreational forms such as hockey were arrived at more gradually and less formally. The basic concern being addressed, however, is very similar: our life together requires protection from outside influences, many of which undermine the very principles that make our life possible. The wisdom of a faith-based tradition is necessary to help us make boundaries that protect us from the wisdom of the world.

What these guidelines make clear is that despite the changing nature of the technologies we accept and the sports we play, one thing has not changed: Hutterites recognize that lines need to be drawn for the well-being of the overall membership, and that drawing these lines is something the whole community needs to be involved in. Hutterites may look a lot different today than they did even ten or twenty years ago, but they still value the wisdom of tradition and the mediating voice of the community. In that way, Hutterites have resisted some of the elements of modernity and selectively accepted other features.

Endnotes
1 It is not a coincidence that Apple and other successful technology corporations market their products with the prefix, ‘i’. Think of iPod, iPad, iPhone and iMac, Apple’s premier products. Similarly, Apple’s software suite, iLife, includes programs with names such as iTunes, iPhoto and iMovie, all designed to promote individual creativity and consumption. A recent software application created by Hutterites for singing traditional songs is an excellent example of how some Hutterites have adopted some aspects of modernity to promote their interests. The application’s name “IchSing,” or iSing in English, suggests influence from Apple’s consumer culture.

Voices of Anti-Modernity: ‘Horse and Buggy’ Mennonites in Canada, Belize and Latin America

Royden Loewen, Steinbach

They are called “anti-moderns,” members of an “old order,” in effect “social antiques,” people who “have withdrawn from the modern world.” They “ride in buggies and shun high school.” They live in tight-knit, traditional communities. It’s a full life of familiar faces, “a single fabric that stretches from cradle to grave.”

Their women are respected for “their strong work ethic [and] emphasis on ‘family values’” and “within the family they are independent and assertive.” These folks “have not been absorbed into mainstream...society.” Sometimes the “stern rules of the church and the hard daily toil...is too much,” but for them tradition is still “a reliable guide in a volatile world.” They practice a “kind of farming that has been proven to preserve communities.” They are an “old order” people “on the backroad to heaven,” practicing a “patient faith in a perilous world.”

Who are these people? The 180,000 Amish of the United States. They are recognized as icons of past virtues, embraced by Hollywood, acknowledged by the White House, and heralded in the nation’s popular imagination as a symbol of everything that is still good and virtuous. Most Americans know that the Amish are not perfect; there is the whole problem of wild and youthful “Rumspringa”, of landlessness and factory work, even of drug use. But overall, outsiders champion the simple, traditional lives of the Old Order Amish, their non-violence, willingness to suffer, and the automatic way in which they are able to forgive.

Canada, too, has its simple traditionalist, ‘old order’ plain people. The problem is that Canada’s ‘Horse and Buggy’ Anabaptists are spread out through the Americas. About 4000 Swiss-descendent, Old Order Mennonites, live in southern...
Ontario and a few hundred in central Manitoba. But another 70,000, or so, Low German speaking, mostly Old Colony ‘Horse and Buggy’ Mennonites with Canadian roots are spread throughout Central and South America. About 10,000 live in Mexico, some still in Chihuahua, some in Zacatecas, most in Campeche in the far south of the country. Smaller numbers can be found in Shipyard, Barton Creek and Spring Field Colonies in Belize. Others settled Rio Verde and Nuevo Durango in East Paraguay. A few ranch and farm at Santa Rosa in northern Argentina. Most, perhaps 60,000, live in Bolivia, and most of these, within two or three hours by car of Santa Cruz, in southeast Bolivia.

The problem is that hidden in these places, they also seem voiceless. Most often we hear from them when something very bad happens on their colonies, or when well meaning northerners label their social problems ‘general’ in nature, endemic to their culture. We may know that they reject the automobile, electricity, rubber tires on tractors, and telephones, and live in modest dwellings, toiling on farms. But the fact is that they are often misunderstood. From many conversations I gather that many North Americans see the Old Colonists’ voluntary simplicity as poverty that needs to be remedied, their commitment to simple technologies as backwards, their quietness as lifeless, their solemnity in church as joylessness, and their practical everyday discipleship as encased in an inability to ‘verbalize’ and defend their faith. But what do they say about themselves? What do they say they believe, what do they think of themselves? What do they think constitutes good and bad, what makes sense to them, what is the purpose of life, what grounds authority? What are the ‘soft facts’ of their worlds?

**The Ontario ‘Horse and Buggy’ Mennonites**

Of these various traditionalist communities, those in Ontario are both more visible and audible than the Latin Americans. The Canadians are of Swiss-Pennsylvania descent, they draw tour buses from nearby Toronto, and travel the busy highways of southern Ontario. They openly talk about themselves, their way of life, and their values. Their history is well known: an 1889 schism led by Abraham Martin cited English language meetings and Sunday Schools as dangerous to a non-resistant, simple faith. Because Martin’s followers were concentrated in Woolwich Township, within Waterloo County, they were also known as Woolwichers, but mostly they were simply the ‘Old Order’ Mennonites. When the car was introduced into Canadian society, especially in the 1920s and 30s, the Old Order took a stance against the “devil’s machine,”11 denying communion to anyone purchasing it. An offshoot of the Woolwichers, the David Martin Group, went further, summarily excommunicating anyone purchasing a car.12

These Mennonites have their voices. Take Isaac Horst of Mount Forest, Ontario, for example. In his *A Separate People: An Insider’s View of Old Order Mennonite Customs and Traditions*, he describes his people: their worship service order; courtship rituals; colonization attempts; minister selections; technology ‘wars’ (to use the Dachwaggeli or the open buggy); and even their schisms (the way in which car-tolerating Markham Mennonites came to be separate from the horse-and-buggy Woolwichers).

But Horst’s book is more than a guided tour; it is a defence of a way-of-life – nonconformist, non-resistant, agrarian, and given to “discipline, obedience and discipleship.”13 And Horst energetically defends a wide array of practices, including excommunication, women’s unpaid work, corporal punishment, farm isolation, unannounced visiting, controlled dating, and so forth. This defender of the faith is also an unrelenting Biblicist. At the outset Horst announces boldly that he will not “apologize for such Scripture texts” as “If any one loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.”14

As he defends the old way, he also lectures us moderns on our waywardness. Here is a prophetic critique of the wider Mennonite world and even Canadian society in general. Horst’s list of modern vices is long – feminism, television, church truancy, urbanism, sexual licence and social assistance top this list. He notes categorically that Old Order women “would rather do...sewing, than to work outside the home” and he is certain that “showing photographs to friends...is a demonstration of pride.”15 In the process he seems to possess a hope that Old Order culture could be accepted more widely.

The very germ of Old Order life, however, is more spiritual and cultural. In this book people “come to Christ,” they encounter “believer’s convictions,” they “look to Christ.”16 Individualism is spurned: candidates for the ministerial are “comforted” not congratulated; children are discouraged from obtaining “good paying” jobs; readers are chided for seeking in Christianity a “crown without a cross.”17 There is nothing staid and mindlessly traditional about these people.

Of course, Horst’s book is just one of many works describing the Old Order of southern Ontario. Works by Donald Martin, Donald Kraybill, Carl Bowman and others could also be mentioned.18

**Introducing the ‘Horse and Buggy’ Mennonites South of the Rio Grande**

The books on the ‘Horse and Buggy’ Low German Mennonites south of the Rio Grande are more hidden from the North American eye. More often than not they are written by Europeans or published by European presses: Anna Sofia Hedberg’s anthropological study of Old Colonists in Nuevo Durango, Bolivia, is published by Uppsala University in Sweden; Lorenzo Canás Botte’s work on the Old Colonists in northern Argentina by Brill in Leiden, Netherlands; the study of Belizean Mennonites by Carel Roessingh and his students by the Free University in Amsterdam; and Larry Towell’s brilliant and moving photographic work by Phaidon Press in London, England.19 There are, of course, other works in English by Abe Warkentin, David Quiring, Calvin Redekop, Edgar Stoesz, Delbert Plett and H. Leonard Sawatsky, and academic theses by half a dozen scholars; these contain utterances from the Low German traditionalists, although most of these do not specifically address the most traditionalist of the Low German Mennonites.20 This could also be said about the works in German: Walter Schmiedehaus of Mexico is a classic; two books, one by Sieghard and Sylvia Schartner, and another by Kennert Giesbrecht and Wilfried Klassen, are more recent.21

These works all carry snippets of the rich oral discourse that infuses and gives shape to the faith-based, cultural worlds of the Low German ‘Horse and Buggy’ Mennonites, mostly members of one of several branches of the Old Colony Church. To hear from them more directly, one can go to their own writings: to their published memoirs, their letters reproduced in the *Steinbach Post* before the mid 1960s and in the *Mennonitische*
Post after the mid 1970s, and their own testimonials, given on visits to their colonies. This is where my students and I have found their voices, a summary of which I want to share in the rest of this paper.\textsuperscript{22} The voices you will hear below are ones recorded for a book on the ‘transnational’ worlds of the Canadian-descendent Low German speaking Mennonites of the Americas which has been completed in draft form and now awaits publication. More specific recordings of their voices were offered at the “Anti-Modern Pathways” conference, the subject in a forthcoming issue of the \textit{Journal of Mennonite Studies}. For the time being here is an outline of some of their thoughts.

\textbf{People Along the Way}

I begin with an introduction to some of the people I met in 2004 and 2009, a welcoming, curious, humour-filled, generous folk, committed to discipleship, love, and intentional privation. For the sake of their privacy I have altered their names.\textsuperscript{23} Peter Warkentin is a tall, friendly, and even comical man, dressed in black overalls and dark, long-sleeved shirt, of Cupisei Colony near Santa Cruz, Bolivia. On a visit in March 2004, he explains to me that as a minister he tries to convince his people to reject cars because they are noisy, frighten horses, stir up a lot of dust, and divide the Mennonites internally, setting off those with means from those without and making connections to the outside seem natural. He tells me that personally, he doesn’t especially like horses.

Margaretha Krahn of Sabinal Colony, north of Casas Grandes in Chihuahua State, Mexico, is a young mother to some 10 smiling, blond children. In January 2004 she tells me that her community relocated to this semi-desert plain from more fertile La Honda because “dann kauhm dee Kjleen Gemeenda doa enenn,” then the Kleine Gemeinde moved in there. She denounces the church of my grandparents as a group of the “broad way,” sweeping up those who “get themselves excommunicated” by the Old Colony Church.

Martin Klippenstein is a young boy in Rivas Palacios colony, Bolivia. When my MCC host, Dick Braun, and I overshoot the Klippenstein family’s driveway in our red Toyota 4x4, young Martin flags us down and shouts that we “had been completely lost;” I can imagine his thoughts that all “iron horses” lose their way. Later his father reflects on his meagre holdings, but is deeply satisfied that his adult daughter in Canada owns eight head of cattle on his farm, and that he can share all earnings from the farm with his young married son and his wife.

Aron Thiessen is a well established farmer of Rivas Palacios colony, Bolivia who, in March 2004, agrees that the Mennonites’ veneration of the German language, of ‘Dietsch’, keeps him from enjoying the full fruits of the country. To make the point, he offers a joke: “a Low German Mennonite goes to London, England, boasting that he has no need for English – and sure enough when he retires at night the dog’s bark could well be that of his Low German dog’s back home; when the rooster crows at dawn, it is identical to his Low German rooster’s crow back home; and then, the maid calls him for breakfast, he doesn’t understand her at all, and, he misses breakfast.”

Maria Neufeld, of Cupisei Colony near Santa Cruz, Bolivia, is a petite, friendly woman, married to the colony mayor. Wearing the tell tale print dress and black kerchief, she is surprised to learn that I live in Steinbach, Manitoba, and that my children have attended Elmdale Elementary School. Maria herself attended Elmdale in the mid-1950s when her family sojourned in Canada after a time in Belize. Like my daughter Rebecca, Maria was a student of Mr. Melvin Toews. Still able to read in English, Maria asks me to send her Miriam Toews’s Canadian best seller \textit{Swing Low}, based on Melvin’s tragic death.

Jakob Schulz is the Old Colony bishop at a colony in East Paraguay whose congregation seems to be in open rebellion in July 2009. He is a thin, quiet and pleasant man, dressed in a black shirt, black overalls, and a cowboy hat. He has preached against the car and truck, and hydro electricity, but seemingly to no avail. Even the agreement to reserve Sunday for only ‘horse and buggy’ travel seems to be eroding. He is thankful that “his wife is good to him,” curious about the gathering of 6000 Mennonites from around the world at Asuncion, open to my brief visit with my friend Paul Redekop from Canada. The ‘Ohm’ contemplates a move to southern Bolivia where the brethren still practice the old ways.

Sara Guenther is only 12, but accompanied by half a dozen of her younger siblings, I am the honoured guest. I have arrived at Colonia El Sur in the far south of Bolivia a day before the
family expected me. Sara's father Benjamin is out in the field, covering the corn pile as rain is threatening. Sara's mother is scurrying about making a night time meal for me, the complete stranger. The children pepper me with questions, they show me their drawings, they take me on a tour of the schoolhouse attached to their house. Suddenly Sara's grandfather appears, smiling warmly, he insists that I must cross the field in the dark to visit his house too, meet his wife and his unmarried children, and have something to eat, and stay at least until Benjamin returns from the field. That night I have no choice, but to consume two late night meals.

These folks are a quiescent people, fully aware of the cost of their stubborn faith, knowing the range of outside temptations, willing to engage in conversation with outsiders who respect them, and feeling the burden of faithfulness.

**Taking Up the Walking Stick to ‘Heathen’ Lands, 1920s**

Their own writings tell a more formal story. Their histories invariably emphasize migration. The starting date of the Old Colony (or Reinlaender) church is 1875 at the banks of the Red River where Bishop Johann Wiebe spoke of a new start in a new land, a new, fuller commitment to following Christ, a society in which the church, and not secular government, would lead.24 It was all possible because they had arrived in a new land and could start afresh. Over the next several decades, this commitment took form as a range of outside lures – evangelistic meetings, municipal government, state-supported education, individual homesteads, fancy buggies, and the automobile – came along. The defining moment was 1919 when a new Public Schools Attendance Act in Manitoba and Saskatchewan was enforced and Bishop Johann Friesen spoke of the moment in which the church needed to relocate and thus be “refined” like gold in fire. True Mennonites, said Friesen and other leaders, were pilgrims, strangers and sojourners in this world, ready to move at any time, struggling for congregational purity, all in preparation for the final migration, to heaven. In 1922 some 6000 traditionalist Mennonites, mostly Old Colony but also some Sommerfelder, began taking leave of Canada, and making their way to northern Mexico.

A close reading of their own histories supports the fundamental Old Colony idea of pilgrimage. In his memoir recounting the emigration of Old Colony Mennonites from Canada to Mexico in the 1920s, Minister Isaac M. Dyck emphasizes the effect of the new legislation in Manitoba and Saskatchewan. With these laws, a product of the patriotic days of the First World War, the government gave itself the right to determine just what Mennonite children would learn in school. The Old Colonists smelled a plot. Mixed into the school legislation, wrote Dyck, was “an inextinguishable enthusiasm for the art of war” and a plan that “militarism be instilled in every child.” Mennonite children were to learn the rallying cry “one king, one country, one field, one flag, one all-British empire: love and sacrifice for the Fatherland.” The sojourn in any country needed to end when that country demanded this level of patriotism.

According to Dyck, the Mennonites’ only option was to leave the Dominion of Canada with its attachment to the imperial culture of the British Empire. Religious rebirth and commitment could only occur in exile, away from a land most Canadian Mennonites had come to call home.25 As Dyck saw it, the Mennonites needed to search for a particular kind of land. The problem with Canada was not only its war-spawned patriotism, but that its wealth and middle class culture was sneaking up on the Mennonites, beginning to change them in fundamental ways.26

To make his point, Dyck related a mystical experience of another Mennonite minister, Jacob Wiens of Saskatchewan, in 1913, just a year before the outbreak of the war. Outside the village of Reinland, “while looking out over a field...of swaying wheat with its beautiful ears,” Wiens heard “a voice come from above and say... ‘you will not be able to stay here [in Canada] forever; the [Mennonite] church will once again have to take up the walking staff.’” Wiens asked, “but where to”, and “in his spirit he received the following answer: ‘if the [Mennonite] church wishes to maintain itself in the pure gospel, it will once again need to settle among a heathen people.’”27 A “heathen” land denoted a primitive and strange place, one far removed from the comforts of Protestant Anglo Canada; only in such a land could the Mennonites secure their eternal salvation.

True Mennonites, emphasized Dyck, were “alien[s] in the world,” collectively, resembling a modern children of Israel. As such they choose a difficult pathway, one outlined in the Martyr’s Mirror, a record of “followers of Jesus...born into sorrow, suffering and persecution” and called to “walk in all humility and lowliness.”28 The pathway of the 1920s was similarly not merely the road to Mexico, but to eternal life in heaven, the figurative Zion.29 The message was clear: the faithful had always been pilgrims in this world.

**Testing the Faith in Mexico, 1930s**

These were the thoughts behind the migration to Mexico in 1922, and the creation of five distinct colonies – Manitoba, Swift (Current), Santa Clara and Santa Rita in Chihuahua state and Hague, or La Patos, in Durango state. Here the Mennonite migrants could follow the simple paths of their ancestors. It meant physical struggle, to be sure, but also cultural struggle. And despite their own territory, and the cultural distance that their Low German language and the Obregón-issued Privilegium gave them, they worried. In the mid 1930s, for example, Chihuahua government authorities closed the Mennonites’ schools for many months, citing the obvious – they contravened the Mexican constitution that forbade church-run schools. Many Mexico Mennonites returned to Canada, others contemplated a new move – to Paraguay, Quebec, northern Alberta, North Dakota, Bolivia, even South Africa or Australia – but the majority and the most stalwart stayed.

What caused the emigration fever to die down? Certainly it mattered that in the winter of 1936 Mexico did an about face and reopened the schools. But even as doomseayers were insisting that Mexico could never again be trusted, an even stronger chorus of voices, ranging from businessmen to church elders to women farm householders arose, citing Canada as the bad “step parent.” Mexico, they said, had its “dark” side, but Canada was still the great betrayer. If Mexico was a difficult land, it was still the land to which God had led them from an intolerant and godless Canada. Indeed, the suffering that life in Mexico entailed was a small price to pay for ultimate religious freedom.

Letters describing this perspective filled the Steinbach Post at the time. A September 1936 anonymous writer described the complexity of Mexico and then restated a simple fact about Canada: “if it was right for us to leave Canada in those days [i.e. 1922], it cannot be right for us to return today.” Clearly,
“the situation that spurred [the Mennonites] to emigrate at that
time has not changed” and nor “in essence” have conditions
in Canada “since the time we arrived here.” Canada in 1936
was no more benign than it had been in 1916.

Johann Knelsen’s letter of December 1936 directly
embraced suffering as a blessing. Life in Swift Current, Sas-
katchewan in 1918 and 1919 had been a good one and “if it
is there today as it was 35 years ago, then sure, I would go.”
But Knelsen also recalled that in 1921 as “we gathered to
consider the question of immigration to Mexico we listened
to Bishop A. Wiebe teach us from Corinthians 6: 1-11,” about
being willing “to be wronged” and eventually “inheriting the
Kingdom of God.” At the time, Knelsen asked, “what is caus-
ing the elder such anxiety?” but now in 1936 he understood:
“Friend, read through the large Martyrs Mirror and in it you
will discover the duty of the Christian in the faith.” Just as
their Anabaptist forebears had been united in Christ in suffer-
ing, so too Mennonites would find spiritual wholeness within
adversity in Mexico.

Even a decade after the school closings, letters reminded the
faithful of why Mexico was blessed. A submission from a “Frau
Guenther” published in October 1945 reflected on life back in
Hague, Saskatchewan before the 1922 migration. She recalled
how her destiny was salvaged by her father’s stalwart faith:

[Father] was often encouraged by the local school board to
send his daughter to town [for higher] education. He didn’t
want to and now I am so thankful to him and to God that he
didn’t. What would have happened if I had gone? The old
fashioned, simple dresses would not have survived as I would
have assimilated the ways of the world. What kind of children
would I have had? Boys who joined the army, girls who would
have mocked the old ways. The children would not have valued
the simple rural life they now live out in Mexico.

No doubt Frau Guenther was hearing of Canadian Men-
nonite boys heading to war, of patriotic exercises in Canada’s
public schools and of the unprecedented numbers of Men-
nonites heading for towns and cities. If Canada had been a
‘worldly’ country after the First World War, it was much more
so at the close of the Second. A faith tested in Mexico could
be a lasting faith.

On to British Honduras and Bolivia, 1950s and 1960s

After a long generation in Mexico and Paraguay, a large
number of Mennonites from both countries were on the move
again in the 1950s and 60s. A sojourner’s mindset meant that
these migrants never saw their settlements as permanent and
were prepared to make secondary and even tertiary migrations.
Ironically, just as thousands of Mennonites began returning to
Canada, thousands of others, that is, the ultra-traditionalists,
‘Horse and Buggy’ Old Colonists, sought cultural refuge in
more southern locations promising greater isolation from the
wider society.

This mid-century migration southward was complex, but
the main story is about two migrations. In1958 Mennonites
from Chihuahua State, Mexico, compelled by talk of a national
social service program, moved south to British Honduras, the
tiny country on the Caribbean just south of Mexico, and here
the most conservative of the Old Colonists found themselves
at first in Blue Creek and Shipyard Colonies, but quite quickly
coalesced in the latter. The second, and much larger, migra-
tion, beginning in 1967, took the most traditionalist of the Old
Colony Mennonites (and some Sommerfelder) from Mexico
to Bolivia, not far from an earlier colony of Paraguayan Men-
nonites. Here, just south of Santa Cruz they established Riva
Palacios, Swift Current, Santa Rita and Sommerfeld colonies.
Many other smaller migrations ensued, including a 1968 group
of Old Colony Mennonites from northern Alberta and British
Columbia who founded Colonia Las Piedras, north of Santa
Cruz.

The Mennonites in both British Honduras and Bolivia drew
a lot of attention, from the national presses and from a number
of North American ethnographers. Both sources of information
carried the voices of the migrants who willingly engaged the
strangers, whether journalist or academic. The way the Old
Colony voices were filtered was certainly not uniform, but
in all cases their world view, values and perspectives, came
through rather clearly.

H. Leonard Sawatzky, the author of Mennonite Settlement
in British Honduras was rather critical of the Old Colonists at
Shipyard Colony in British Honduras. Shipyard, he scolded,
exhibited a penchant for “isolation, denigration of learning”
with a troubling consequence of “cultural impoverishment.”
The Old Colonists had earned the scorn of the national govern-
ment, increasingly “impatien[t] with the ‘alien’ Mennonites’
aloof and ‘privileged’ status.” The Shipyard Mennonites had
miscalculated, mistaking “initial assessment of the verdant
d jungle growth” with “exceptional fertility.” They had failed
to make a quick transition from beans and corn to rice and
citrus fruit. They made “grave errors of judgement” by burning,
rather than sawing into boards, the indigenous hard wood
trees. In their racial arrogance they had also ignored the basic
pattern by “which the Maya milpero [farmer] determines and
regulates his clearing, burning and planting.”

Sawatzky was unrelenting. The Shipyard colonists’ insis-
tence on ‘horse and buggy’ travel and steel wheeled traction
was especially problematic. Their own religious mythologies
were to blame in this instance. For example, the Old Colonists
would not allow themselves to be steered from a 1916 event in
which church “leaders in Manitoba and Saskatchewan agreed
to ban the automobile forever and to arrest technological in-
novation in agricultural machinery at the then-existing stage.”

The ultra modern small steel-wheeled farm tractor of 1916
could be tolerated, but rubber tires, providing improved “trac-
tion and flotation [and]…fuel economy…on the difficult soils of
British Honduras,” were forbidden as they turned tractors into
virtual cars. Their reliance on horses for travel was equally
short-sighted as the Central American “heat and humidity” left
them lethargic. The result of it all was that “much of the arable
Altkolonier [Old Colonist] land…[lay] in a very indifferent state
of cultivation.” Sawatzky was especially impatient with the
elders who “threatened with excommunication.” The voices
coming through Sawatzky’s filter were indeed intolerant and
shortsighted.

Academic observers of Bolivia Mennonites drew a remark-
ably different conclusion. In 1970, James Lanning of A&M
University in Texas, reported on his visit to the new Bolivian
Colonies, focusing in particular on what seems to be Riva Pa-
lacios. His informants spoke a hopeful, harmonious language.
They told Lanning how the Mexico colonies had simply become
too “sophisticated,” pierced by a paved highway, and socially

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Bolivia’s thousands of hectares of new farmland allowed them to confront modernity, that is, to maintain the steel-wheeled tractors, ‘horse and buggy’ mode of transportation, and life without electricity.

Lanning painted a portrait of confident settlers. The Old Colonists described ancient ways of interacting with nature, of skills passed down through the generations. They had even learned from past mistakes and now had “sold land in Mexico for high prices and bought 100,000 acres for [only] 65 cents an acre.” They had negotiated a fine set of “broad religious and education and political concessions” from a willing government. They were aware that it had its own national agenda: “the abolition of huge land estates [and] commercialization of agriculture.”

The rigors of settlement itself were socially healthy. Their new Bolivian homes lay in a “sea of green…[in] shocking contrast to the barren wind-blown prairie” of northern Mexico. The “trials and tribulations” of forging a settlement in the wilderness dictated “that each member of the family work from early morning until late in the evening, sometimes by the light of lantern to clear this vegetative barrier.” But these labours made for familial cohesion and produced healthy bodies. Perhaps the typical house was a rough wooden frame structure, a story and a half, 18 x 44 feet, often with earthen floor bedrooms, but the Mennonites thrived in them; in fact from Lanning’s perspective, the “striking feature of the home was its orderliness and cleanliness.”

And even though their sense of life in North America often seemed farfetched, it bore a semblance of truth. One member claimed to have heard of “dying houses,” that is, “places in the United States where families send their elders” to die. Another had heard that “all children in Canada wear glasses…[because] all the children in Canada watch television.” A third recalled hearing that “someone was trying to build a machine in Canada that could pull words from the sky,” no matter if they had been spoken “eons ago.” Their isolation would protect them from a wider world gone askew.

Certainly the Old Colonists under Lanning’s gaze were not without want. Their birth rate was too high, they sometimes seemed overtly racist, and their long sleeved dress made no sense in tropical climate. Still, in Lanning’s estimation, the Old Colony appeared to be an example of social well being. Family life was close-knit: fathers and sons, working...
side-by-side, developed “a genuine feeling of togetherness and common purpose.” The “mealtimes were a time of physical enjoyment for the whole family as a bountiful table was common”, and the Mennonites seemed grateful as they “bowed their heads before [and after] eating for a short, silent prayer.” Old age was respected, with members testifying to a “tradition of taking care of their own” elderly and with “the younger generation…consult[ing] their elders for advice when making decisions.”

Even their seemingly somber church and institutional life bore positive results. They seemed to live without being “fearful of death,” finding peace in trusting the divine. To “the God-fearing Old Colonist,” wrote Lanning, “the success of the present colonization effort is at the mercy of his Creator.” Education was rudimentary, but it was a priority and it was sensible; the schoolhouse, for example, was “one of the first buildings to be erected,” and special attention was heaped on “children with handicaps.” Politically, the village was profoundly democratic; the village and colony mayor was “elected from the eligible men of the village” for a two year term with no chance of succeeding “himself in office.” Conflicts were resolved by the village mayor, and only occasionally, when it moved “beyond [his] scope,” by clergy, “the higher echelon of…rule making in each” colony, but never by outside authorities.

When the Old Colonists were asked about the future, some expressed uncertainty that old ways could continue indefinitely. But what could be presumed, concluded Lanning, was that, based on child birth rates and the social health of the community, the “contingent in Bolivia may one day replace the mother colony in Mexico as the citadel of Old Colony faith.” Bolivians knew they would play a crucial role in preserving an old faith.

New Settlements in Paraguay, Argentina and Campeche, 1980s and 1990s

In the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, new colonies were built on the east side of Bolivia’s Rio Grande; they were daughter colonies of Riva Palacios and other 1960s era colonies, and colonies filled with new migrants from Canada and Belize. During these years too, thousands of Old Colonists from Chihuahua and Durango states in Mexico, relocated to the far southern state of Campeche. But two new countries in particular – Paraguay and Argentina – now became the focus of Mexico ‘Horse and Buggy’ Mennonites. The exodus from northern Mexico for these points south occurred because modern ways took over, and order was especially fair game. A May 1982 letter from the newly settled Durango Colony in East Paraguay related how colonists had left Mexico because of violence. The letter, signed “Franz and Margaretha Friesen,” spoke of drought in Paraguay, but gave a glowing and somewhat racialized report on the social aspects of East Paraguay, the Friesens’ home now for four years:

I can say truthfully, we do not want to return to Mexico, even though it was a big change for us. The government [here] is very good and the native people leave us alone. Only occasionally does one hear of a murder, no resemblance with Mexico. Anyone involved in the marijuana trade is unmercifully dealt with….Also we never hear the native Paraguayans complaining about the president.

The letters from Paraguay express another deeply held belief; that is, the long-standing Anabaptist ‘two-kingdom’ tradition that prescribed a disengagement from the nation-state. In seeming contradiction, these pacifists simultaneously considered themselves separate from the state, subject to government, and equipped to comment on it. The state’s record on law and order was especially fair game. A May 1982 letter from the newly settled Durango Colony in East Paraguay related how colonists had left Mexico because of violence. The letter, signed “Franz and Margaretha Friesen,” spoke of drought in Paraguay, but gave a glowing and somewhat racialized report on the social aspects of East Paraguay, the Friesens’ home now for four years:

The Mennonite view was that good citizens were a grateful, deferential and law abiding people. A final characteristic that comes through in these letters is identification with the poor. In the same letter, the writer notes that, in Paraguay “there are no beggars in the villages, and on the long trip to Asuncion anyone can see that they live in small houses, huddle in groups drinking Tereré” and with their few acres of mandioc, maize, banana, and orange trees “it looks as if they have nourishment and clothing and are content.” The writer saw them as a “humble and simple people.”

A similar mindset is expressed in a final migration, the late 1980s move from colonies near Nuevo Casas Grandes, not far from the U.S. border, to northern Argentina. The reasons for this migration were multifaceted, but what mattered most was whether the Mennonites would be allowed military exemption and permission to run their own affairs, that is, their own “Privilegium.” A December 1989 account reported on attempts by the Old Colony Mennonite community of Capulin to settle in Argentina:

The four [emigration] delegates – 2 colony mayors, 1 preacher and 1 deacon – who went to Argentina have come
back with favourable reports. They had been received there in friendly fashion. The land is in La Pampa province, near the city of Santa Rosa. The climate there is suitable for crop and cattle farming, similar to what they know from Mexico. On Thursday, August 22, the [Capulin congregation] had a Brotherhood meeting, attended by those interested in emigration. Yet, no final decision has been made...as first the question of the ‘Privilegium’ must be ruled on.\(^61\)

The question of “privileges” out-ranked by far the particular attraction of La Pampa.

Late in 1989 Capulin delegates joined yet another Mexico Mennonite delegation, from La Honda Colony in Zacatecas, to seek a personal audience with the Argentine President. According to a report from La Honda, delegates Johan Fehr and Jacob Penner, the trip “had been unsuccessful” as they had been unable to secure an audience with President Carlos Menem. As they put it, they had hoped to “speak with the president” in person, but he had not “had time for them.” Nevertheless the delegates were heartened by the fact that they “had been well received by the president’s officials and...that it was not impossible to obtain a ‘Privilegium.’”\(^62\) Good land and friendly hosts were less important than a national guarantee of separation from military service and patriotic schooling.

Another migration to Argentina in 1995, this one from Durango State, Mexico, illustrated yet another value frequently voiced in Old Colony communities. A report published in May of that year noted many auction sales had been completed and that the families were hoping to leave for Argentina soon. The report was that they had purchased 8687 hectares, 350 kilometers east of the city of Resistencia, for a price of $477,785 USD, with only $167,785 outstanding, and that the vendor, a lawyer, had promised to help the Mennonites with their immigration papers. But significantly, the Old Colony administrators were raising money to help the poorer of the emigrants by levying a special tax of two peso per liter of milk sold, even as the decreasing value of the Mexican peso was making this attempt difficult. The money from the colony was to be used to purchase 25 hectare plots for the poor, a sum that needed to be paid back only after the settlement had taken root.

**Conclusion**

A full history of the Canadian and Canadian-descendent Old Colony ‘Horse and Buggy’ Mennonites awaits to be written. While the Amish and Old Order Mennonites in the United States fill up dozens of volumes, the story, especially of the...
Low German-speaking Old Colony traditionalists of Central and South America, often remains shrouded in mystery. Most often word of them arises only when outsiders probe the communities for social problems, overlooking the genius that gives them coherence in the first instance, and rarely stopping to ask about this world from the colonists themselves. They may seem foreign to the outsider, suspicious of strangers, but in fact, an act of friendship, extended from visitors without instant and predetermined judgment, is rewarded by articulate voices willing to talk reflectively about life on the colonies. And those voices present a people who are highly adaptable to new environments, shifting economic conditions, and constant challenges to their anti-modern ways. These communities represent dynamic encounters with a modern world, encounters however that openly challenge the modern world’s gospel of upward mobility, consumer culture, resource depletion, generational gaps, individualism, competition, and an undue reliance on faceless, state-funded institutions. Such a culture seems far removed from the way of Christ. Like other traditionalist Anabaptists, these “Horse and Buggy” people are on a “backroad to heaven.” As they see it, this “backroad” is also a “narrow way” that “few” seem to “find” or understand.

Endnotes
1 This article is a compilation of original writing with excerpts from previously published materials, including a book review of Isaac Horst’s A Separate People: An Insider’s View of Old Order Mennonite Customs and Traditions (Kitchener: Herald Press, 2000) and an article on Latin American Mennonites in the Mennonite Quarterly Review. Much of the material is part of a presently unpublished book-length manuscript. “Villages Beyond the Nation: Canadian Low German Mennonites in a Transnational World, 1916-2006.”
7 Thomas J. Myers and Steven M. Nolt, Amish Patchwork: Indiana’s Old Order in the Modern World (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2005), xvii.
8 Wendel Berry, introduction, in David Kline, Great Possessions: An Amish Farmer’s Diary (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), ix.
12 Frank Epp, Mennonites in Canada: A People’s Struggle for Survival (Toronto: Macmillan, 1982), 430-1.
13 Horst, 29.
14 Ibid., 16.
15 Ibid., 110, 187.
16 Ibid., 110, 116, 122, 174.
17 Ibid., 174.
18 Donald Martin, Old Order Mennonites of Ontario: Gelassenheit, Discipleship, Brotherhood (Kitchener: Pandora, 2003); Kraybill and Bowman, On the Backroad to Heaven; Donald Martin.
22 I want to give special thanks to Andrea Dyck, Robyn Sneath, Kerry Fast, Susie Fisher and Angela Thiessen for their research on the Steinbach Post and Mennonite Post.
23 These visits, most made to collect information on a book on the Low German Mennonites of the Americas and Transnationalism, were funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the D. F. Plett Historical Research Foundation Inc.
27 Dyck, “Emigration from Canada.”
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid., 4.
30 Steinbach Post, 16 September 1936.
31 Ibid., 6 January 1937.
32 Ibid., 24 October 1945.
34 Ibid., 13.
35 Ibid., 19.
36 Ibid., 41.
37 Ibid., 33.
38 Ibid., 33 and 34.
39 Ibid., 34.
40 Ibid.
42 Ibid., 26.
43 Ibid., 29.
44 Ibid., iii.
45 Ibid., 16.
46 Ibid., 48.
47 Ibid., 36.
48 Ibid., 67.
49 Ibid., 75 and 84.
50 Ibid., 67 and 97.
51 Ibid., 69.
52 Ibid., 71.
53 Ibid., 75.
54 Ibid., 77 and 78.
55 Ibid, 83.
56 Ibid, 86.
57 Ibid, v.
58 Ibid, vi.
60 Ibid., 19 May 1995.
61 Ibid., 15 December 1989.
62 Ibid.; see also Ibid., 19 May 1995.
63 Kraybill and Bowen, A Backroad to Heaven.
Three Pilgrims

In July 1945, as World War II was drawing to an end, my 42-year-old father, Peter D. Friesen, along with two younger ministers of the Steinbach Kleine Gemeinde, Ben D. Reimer and Archie Penner, set off for Winona Lake, Indiana. My father had just been named pastor of the Steinbach church. The purpose of the trip was to attend inspirational evangelization meetings. The resort town of Winona Lake was known as the home of professional-baseball-player-turned-dynamic-evangelist Billy Sunday (1862-1935). Sunday had been dead for 10 years, but his legacy was going strong. The gigantic Billy Sunday Tabernacle seated 7,500, and the tabernacle and other venues were the location of many conferences and assemblies gathered for the purpose of spreading an enthusiastic, patriotic, and fundamentalist brand of evangelical Christianity.

This pilgrimage probably did not have the blessing of the General Ministerial Council of the Manitoba Kleine Gemeinde, which in 1945 still maintained a traditional, conservative stance. In his trip account, my father does not indicate from where the financing of the trip came; it is likely that he, Penner, and Reimer sponsored themselves. Had there been active opposition from the Ministerial Council, however, they probably would not have undertaken the venture. Even the conservative element in the church had, over the years, been influenced by evangelism to some extent, especially in Steinbach.

Still, they persisted in their traditional interpretation of salvation, that it was achieved (but you could not presume!) through a humble, God-fearing pilgrimage, and they mostly maintained a sceptical stance vis-à-vis the “new” theology. Doreen Peters notes that her father, Ben D. Reimer, found himself in conflict with the Ministerial over just this issue: “His teaching that a person is spiritually transformed the moment Christ is invited into one’s life, and that a person can immediately receive the assurance of sins forgiven - this they could not accept.”

Each of the three men had themselves had such a transformative experience, or at least been touched by evangelical fire. Reimer responded to an altar call at a Steinbach revival meeting held by George Schultz, a Chicago-based Bruderthalers (Evangelical Mennonite Brethren) evangelist, in 1929. Archie Penner had what he called “a dynamic experience with our Lord” as a young adult after his father’s death in 1936. Both Reimer and Penner attended Winnipeg Bible Institute (currently Providence College) in the late 1930s, and Reimer, ever a zealous soul-winner, was soon trying to persuade the Kleine Gemeinde to support missionary activity. By 1945, he was on the faculty of the Steinbach Bible Academy, which had been founded by members of the Mennonite Brethren Church, and which was viewed with disapproval by some of the Kleine Gemeinde Ministerial. Penner was also hired to teach at the Academy that fall, but was not ordained as a minister in Steinbach until 1953.

Friesen attended revival meetings held by George Schultz in the spring of 1931, and recorded in his diary that, “My belief in the Saviour was strengthened very much tonight.” All three men, in their different ways, spoke the language of conversion experience, even though they all had grown up in Mennonite households with strong religious teaching, and might have taken that as sufficient evidence of Christian faith. Whatever their hopes for it might have been, their 1945 journey would be a significant step in the evolution of the Kleine Gemeinde to the Evangelical Mennonite Church and a theology emphasizing missions, soul-winning, and a much more individualistic interpretation of faith.

A Brief History of Revivalism in Steinbach

Revivalism was not new to Steinbach and area. In the early 1880s, Kansan, former Old Mennonite, John Holdeman, preached the necessity of renewal in the Manitoba Kleine Gemeinde. Renewal, he emphasized, was to be brought about by a personal, individual, emotional, and joyful experience of conversion. His results were stunning. Nearly half of the membership converted to the church Holdeman had founded, the Church of God in
Christ, Mennonite. The Gemeinde’s emphasis on humility, often articulated in the exhortation in Philippians for believers to “work out your own salvation in fear and trembling,” left it vulnerable to just such preaching. “There were too many who thought that a true believer must only fear the wrath of God and live a constant life of penitence and spiritual misery.”

Even then, the “need” for revival was not fully met. Grenfeld teacher Heinrich Rempel (1855-1926), who had come to Manitoba in June 1886 from the Molotschna village of Waldheim, “a hotbed of evangelical revivalism,” began a correspondence with Reverend Aaron Wall, organizer of a Minnesota Mennonite congregation known as the “Bruderthaler,” or “brethren in the valley.” In later years they re-named themselves Evangelical Mennonite Brethren (now Fellowship of Evangelical Bible Churches). In 1895 Wall, and Reiseprediger Heinrich Fast (1849-1930), came from Mountain Lake, Minnesota to teach “repentance and forgiveness of sin,” and to preach, “very earnestly and frankly, of the salvation of Christ.” Within two years a branch of the Bruderthaler church formed in Steinbach. Revivalist influences also came from non-Mennonite sources. In November 1897, when the famous evangelist Dwight L. Moody preached to a crowd of 3,500 in Winnipeg, Heinrich E. Kornelsen and others from Steinbach attended and were impressed by Moody’s compelling descriptions of the Last Day.

Fast continued to make frequent visits to Steinbach, winning converts among his fellow Mennonites. After him, Schultz was the predominant evangelizer in Steinbach through the 1920s and 1930s. He taught “an expressed ‘faith in the finished redemptive work [that] justifies and sanctifies the believer.’” This faith was to result in “living on fire for the Lord” and turning the main objective of all that we do as farmers, businessmen, teachers, preachers . . . to [the saving of] souls.”

By the late 1930s, Steinbach residents were no longer content simply to be audiences of evangelism, but were carrying out their own efforts in surrounding communities, like the Ukrainian village of Pansy. Local revivalism took on a new form of expression, the street meeting, accompanied by a local brass band. “Rev. John R. Barkman [grandson of pioneer windmill engineer Peter K. Barkman] of Henderson, Nebraska preached in English at the street meeting Saturday evening, speaking on the signs of the times,” noted the Steinbach Post. The writer’s insertion of “in English” would indicate that, previously, all or almost all revival meetings were conducted in German.

The leadership of the Steinbach Kleine Gemeinde, the most urban of the Kleine Gemeinde groups, gradually began to shift its attitudes toward revivalism, spurred by the defection of some of its prominent members to the Bruderthaler and by the inclination of its young people to attend revival meetings and have conversion experiences. In June, 1942, the tabernacle was completed in Steinbach, a building meant to be a venue for revival meetings and other mass gatherings. Several Kleine Gemeinde members were on the committee to oversee this project, including prominent lumberman C. T. Loewen and teacher Peter J. B. Reimer, who served as secretary. True to the concept “build it and they will come,” meetings were held as soon as the tabernacle was ready. Rev. Peter P. Tschetter of the U.S. (evidently a “Prairieleut” or non-communal-living Hutterite), who spoke in both German and English, held meetings that June, followed by the blind evangelist J. J. Esau.

By the 1940s the Steinbach Bible School had been established, with significant participation from the Kleine Gemeinde despite the Gemeinde’s traditional suspicion toward all forms of higher education. Graduates of the three-year program took courses in personal evangelism and could receive a diploma not just from the school, but also from the “Evangelical Teachers Training Association” of Chicago.

The Summer Conference

Winona Lake, some 130 miles east of Chicago and just south of Elkhart, Indiana, boasted a double identity as a resort town and a centre of fundamentalist religious institutions sponsoring annual Bible conferences. In the summer of 1945 the conference was organized by six evangelists: John R. Rice, Bob Jones, Sr., Hyman Appelman, Jesse Hendley, Robert Wells, and Joe Henry Hankins. They shared a goal of holding nationwide revival campaigns.

Peter Friesen was father to a family of six, and made a bare living doing watch repair from a small Main Street shop. His last-born, yours truly, had arrived in May, 1945. The church at that time did not pay its ministers. Nevertheless, Friesen found the means to make the trip to Winona Lake with Reimer and...
Penner, all of them boarding a Greyhound bus in Winnipeg
on Thursday evening, July 12, 1945. They reached Chicago on
Saturday morning, having spent two uncomfortable nights on
the bus. They were impressed by Chicago, second largest city
in the U.S. at the time: “Boy this is a town,” declared Peter.
In a postcard to his family, he wrote: “We ate our meals, breakfast
and dinner at a small cafeteria served mostly by Negroes, but
it was clean, the eats were swell, and it didn’t cost so much at
that.” They walked “many blocks until our feet were quite sore,”
dropped in at the Moody Bible Institute, and visited the art
museum, whose wonders Peter described in a post card to his
children: “My, my but what all can’t you see here. Indian hand
craft, totem poles (they look very dangerous), cliff dwellers
pots & other articles, even some articles taken from Pompeii.”

Peter scanned the phone book looking for someone familiar
and found “over 50 Reimers and about a dozen Riemers, (and
some spelled their name ‘Reimers’).” He got K. B. Reimer
on the phone and spoke with him in Low German: “It sure
felt fine and I was thrilled.” He, Ben D. Reimer, and Archie
Penner, visited the planetarium, and then Peter took the street
car to Peter B. Reimers for supper (he was half an hour late
because he hadn’t accounted for the long commute distances
in Chicago). They tacked on a brief visit with George Schultz.

Peter sent home a post card of the grand Palmer House Hotel
in downtown Chicago, but he, Reimer and Penner could by
no means afford to stay there. “The whole town of Steinbach,
Winkler, Altona, and Sarto to boot, could all come here at the
same time & sleep in these rooms and they would still have
some empty rooms left yet,” he wrote on the back of the card.
Finding the Y.M.C.A. full, the three spent a third night on the
bus to get to Warsaw, Indiana, and then at last to Winona Lake,
where they had to wait until the afternoon before getting their
rooms at “The Inn.”

“In a way,” Peter wrote in a postcard sent after several days
at the resort, “this place is like Clear Lake [popular vacation
spot in Riding Mountain National Park, western Manitoba],
and yet, oh so different. It’s a very old resort and therefore has
many old buildings. But it is definitely a Christian place. You
hear people talk about church and Jesus etc., and I believe I saw
two people smoking these four days. Christian conventions &
conferences are on all summer, and this has gone on for about
50 years already. On the other side of this card you can see
some of the buildings. I’ve also seen Mrs. Billy Sunday, the
wife of the former evangelist. She has invited all the Christians
to come to her residence, which Billy Sunday had built here
some years ago. Another difference is that you see no people
in bathing suits parading along the sidewalks.”

The three Steinbachers, along with a giant crowd, heard five
days of presentations by dynamic speakers like Sam Morris,
John R. Rice, Jesse Hendley, Bob Jones, Dr. Comer, and Hyman
Appelman - as many as six messages in a day beginning at 7
a.m. The speeches were interspersed with “heart stirring songs”
rendered by “the coloured Negro couple the ‘Findleys’.” Upon
arriving in Chicago, one of the first things Peter had noticed
was that “there sure are very many Negroes in this town,” not
a surprising reaction from someone whose previous social
experience had been pretty much entirely “white.”

The conference speakers were some of the most influential
and powerful voices of American fundamentalism. Sam Mor-
ris (1900-1988) was an enthusiastic temperance preacher from
Stamford, Texas who proclaimed that a born-again Christian
could not be in danger of losing salvation, regardless of his
actions. John R. Rice (1895-1980) founded an influential fun-
damentalist Baptist newspaper called “Sword of the Lord,”
published many books, held regular evangelism conferences,
and was a fierce opponent of religious liberalism. When Peter
later opened a bookstore in Steinbach, he stocked some of
Rice’s titles.

Sam Morris (1900-1988) was a temperance preacher from

John R. Rice (1895-1980) was a Baptist evangelist from Texas.
Photo Credit: Wikipedia.
of the Radio Evangelistic Hour gospel broadcast. Bob Jones (1883-1968) was an evangelist, broadcaster, and founder of Bob Jones University. Jones thought racial segregation to be biblical and the university remained “white” throughout his life time.

Hyman Appelman (1902-1983) was a Russian Jew who immigrated to the United States, converted to Christianity, joined the military, and aimed much of his evangelizing effort to other Jews to convince them that Jesus was the Messiah. Hyman Appelman (1902-1983) was a Russian Jew who immigrated to the United States, converted to Christianity, joined the military, and aimed much of his evangelizing effort to other Jews to convince them that Jesus was the Messiah.20

At Winona Lake, Peter, Archie, and Ben generally ate breakfast at the enigmatically named “Eskimo Inn,” while having dinner and supper at the Winona Cafeteria: “average cost of breakfast 35 cents or 40 cents & the other meals 50 cents to 70 cents.” Unused to buying meals on a regular basis, the Steinbach men found that “the eats are kind of high priced but . . . pretty good.” They were not men of means, and they were also true to their heritage of Mennonite frugality.21

For Peter, the Winona Lake experience was spiritually uplifting and inspiring. He allowed himself a small criticism: “Dr. Comer was kind of theatrical the first two times but this morning (Friday, July 18) he came on fine.” Theatricality was pretty much the opposite of the Kleine Gemeinde speaking and worshippers praised with which Peter had grown up. But in the heated atmosphere at Winona Lake (both metaphorically and literally; temperatures were in the 90s Fahrenheit), he embraced evangelistic enthusiasm. On the last day of services, July 21, Hyman Appelman spoke and “we were just melted in yielding to the spirit.” Archie Penner decided to stay on another week, while Peter and Ben D. Reimer continued on to visit Meade, Kansas. “The Lord is blessing immensely & we’re all ‘fired up’ to work more earnestly, and eagerly & consciously for the Lord, our Master,” Peter declared.

Kansas

Tired and dirty after an overnight train ride from Chicago to Meade via Kansas City, Peter and Ben arrived on the morning of July 23. The Kansas temperatures were in the 90s. The visitors were met by fellow Mennonites. Ben stayed at George J. Rempels (Peter’s wife’s brother), while Peter went to stay with his wife’s parents, the Peter F. Rempels, on their homestead 18 miles southeast of the town of Meade.

For the next few weeks, Ben and Peter, soon joined by Archie Penner, held meetings in people’s homes, and in the local church at Meade. These meetings were held in conjunction with Rev. Henry R. Harms of the Emmanuel Mission Church [he was also a member of the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren (EMB), which had formed the previous year upon the dissolution of the Kleine Gemeinde congregation]. The Kleine Gemeinde had transplanted from Jansen, Nebraska in 1906-08, but through the influences of more evangelistic Mennonite groups and assimilationist pressures of the larger American society, had gradually disintegrated in Kansas. A Diener-Konferenz, held in 1937 and attended by Canadian Kleine Gemeinde ministers, had failed to halt the transformation, and by 1945 almost all of the former Kleine Gemeinde membership belonged either to the Emmanuel Mission Church or to the EMB.22

Although Peter Friesen, Ben D. Reimer and Archie Penner were of the Kleine Gemeinde, it seems that the purpose of their Kansas visit was quite different from that of the Kleine Gemeinde elders who had come in 1937. Instead of seeking ways to preserve the old congregation, they wished to fan whatever fires of revivalism might already be burning in Mennonite Meade County, and to this end embarked on an intense campaign of personal visitations and church meetings.

One of Peter’s diary entries illustrates: “It’s hot but quite a bit of a air. We were at Geo J. Rempels [his brother-in-law] for nite. Then Rev Harms made house visitations with us, 1st G. J. Rempels, 2nd Bartel sisters, 3rd H. A. Friesens, 4th Joe Bartels, 5th Joh Bartel. Service in eve. Christians pledged themselves to a deeper, fuller life. For the night I went to aunt Kl. B. Reimer.” Church meetings were held, it seems, most evenings. Peter delivered one sermon entitled, “What kind of a person God can use.” As Peter was among his parents-in-law, in-laws, and others with varying degrees of family relatedness the religious mission was combined with extensive socializing and visiting.

A Steinbach Post correspondent from Meade wrote, “P. D. Friesen and Ben D. Reimer of Manitoba have been here since the 24th [of July], holding revival meetings. They spoke very earnestly. A number of souls have opened themselves to follow in the footsteps of Christ.”24

Sweet Whispers

At the beginning of the Kansas visit, Peter wrote a long, affectionate letter to his wife Margaret back home in Steinbach. He shared news about relatives, chatted about the food served in the Rempel household (“Ma right away put up lunch, consisting of thin pancakes & watermelons, and we ate that the juice flowed.”) and wrote of his walk in the evening moonlight, following a 104-degree (Fahrenheit) day:

Well, Margaret, you know what this will do to me, a full moon, clear sky, soft breeze, sweet memories of long ago. . . . Yes, memories and longings, the lonely soul yearning for the companionship of its mate; oh sweet heart, look up into the sky to the stately moon hanging there in the soft sky, don’t you hear whispers, sweet whispers, coming down to your sweet ears. Oh, I was so thankful to our good Lord that He had given you, yes you, unto me. Yes, He had seen it fit (it’s 14 years ago now almost to the day) that you should come into my life, lonely life, to stay there forever until death doeth us part here on earth, but then to go on in eternity forever and ever.”25

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The language is extraordinary for a shy man raised in an emotionally reticent community culture. He had, in younger years, been an enthusiastic reader of Zane Grey western novels; the words certainly indicate a literary influence other than historical Anabaptist texts or the Bible (unless the Song of Solomon is counted). Peter becomes almost mystical, almost ecstatic, combining religious and romantic feeling in a single paragraph as if he was experiencing the after-effects of being “melted in the spirit” at the Winona Lake conference. “The lonely soul yearning for its mate” could as easily be the thirsting soul yearning for unification with the Eternal. His expressions of religious and romantic enthusiasm seemed to arise from what Connie Zweig calls our “inborn striving to open our limited personal selves to the archetypal and transpersonal realms.”

In the same letter Peter tells Margaret that he prayed that God would give him “a larger burden for lost souls,” and it was with this burden that he returned to Manitoba. On August 5th, Ben D. Reimer and Archie Penner left Meade for home. Peter left the following day, stopped in Henderson, Nebraska to visit the Grace Children’s Home, and then on to Omaha to the Grace Bible Institute where he was shown around by John R. Dick, originally from Kleefeld, Manitoba, and a relative of Peter’s on his mother’s side (he had changed the “Dueck” spelling of his name). Of Kleine Gemeinde stock, Dick had joined the EMB, taken a doctorate at Southern Baptist Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, and became a teacher at Grace, which had been founded only two years before.

After a day-and-a-half travel by bus, Peter at last reached Winnipeg on the morning of August 10. “At 9:30 we reached Wpg & there the wife & Mrs. K. D. F. [his sister-in-law, Mrs. Klaas D. Friesen] were waiting for me. Happy reunion. Home at 6 p.m.” He did not pause to rest, going out the same evening: “Was at sing practice yet.”

Appelman in Steinbach

Shortly after the Steinbach men returned from their foray down south, the fledgling Steinbach Bible School announced that Ben D. Reimer and Archie Penner had been engaged as teachers, and “new emphasis will be put on missions and English.” By April of the following year Reimer was holding evangelistic meetings in the Kleine Gemeinde church, while Peter led the singing. Peter also reached at the new mission hall in East Steinbach, and although the attendance was only “fair,” “some sinners repented.”

In July, 1946, Hyman Appelman, “Russian-born Jew, formerly successful Chicago lawyer, now internationally known evangelist,” as an advertisement in the Steinbach Post described him, was invited to hold revival meetings at the tabernacle. It is unlikely that Appelman would ever have heard of Steinbach unless the visitors to Winona Lake had spoken with him and issued the invitation. He took the community by storm, holding afternoon and evening meetings, visiting the Kleine Gemeinde Sunday School, and racking up previously unheard of numbers of conversions. He paused to have supper at the Peter D. Friesen’s, but otherwise concentrated on soul-winning. “Some people don’t like this,” commented Peter, referring apparently to more traditional elements within the church. The Carillon News estimated that 8,000 people attended the Appelman meetings over six evenings at the tabernacle: “This has been one of Steinbach’s greatest evangelistic revivals; 400 people or more decided to turn to God.”

Subsequent reports, not substantiated, suggested that Appelman had inappropriately handled funds related to this campaign. This allegation also appears in “Revival,” a short story in Al Reimer’s collection, When War Came to Kleindarp. “Kleindarp” is a fictionalized version of Steinbach, where Reimer, the son of Kleine Gemeinde teacher and minister Peter J. B. Reimer, and later a professor of English at the University of Winnipeg and a well-known novelist and literary critic, grew up. Near the end of “Revival,” (which Reimer sets in 1943), the story’s hero, 16-year-old Daniel Brandt, reads in Time magazine that “Dr. Goldstein” (Appelman) is arrested in the United States, charged with fraud and embezzlement of revival campaign monies.

In the story, Appelman is depicted as an eloquent, forceful evangelist preaching to the gathered crowds in the town’s tabernacle, his “round face luminous with ecstasy.” But the ecstasy is not shared by Danny Brandt; his heart, far from being melted, is frozen in fear: “Panic washes over me in smothering waves. I have trouble breathing and can no longer think clearly.” It is not a fear of hell, exactly, though the evangelist does warn of this terrible fate. Rather, it is a fear of being coerced, of making a decision that would violate his personal integrity. Though friends around him give in to Goldstein’s compelling altar call, though “solemn-looking young strangers” grab his arm in a vise-like grip when he stumbles out of the tabernacle, he wrenches free. A voice within him insists, “Do not give in to fear, to spiritual browbeating, stay true to your real self; keep your mind free and ready for the outside world.”

What P. D. Friesen, Ben D. Reimer and Archie Penner experienced as an uplifting message that could liberate those
in their community, who they might have thought of as still bound by the old Kleine Gemeinde ethos, commanding each person to work out his salvation in fear and trembling, was experienced by some in the next generation as a form of spiritual oppression. How many “Daniel Brandts” were in Appelman’s audience of thousands in Steinbach cannot be known. Surely they were in the minority. Neither evangelical nor traditional, they moved into the “outside world” or stayed in Steinbach; some fared well, and some did not.

Daniel Brandt, as an older man looking back on the summer of 1943, concludes his story with a kind of rueful admiration, “Dr. Hyman Goldstein . . . could have taught these latter-day TV saints a thing or two about spellbinding altar calls.” If there was financial wrong-doing on Appelman’s part, Steinbachers were not overly disturbed. They might have responded like Daniel’s father, “The souls gathered for the harvest will remain gathered no matter what the harvester is or does.” After Appelman, came waves of other “harvesters.” In the years that followed, Steinbach became a favoured venue for evangelists of all kinds.

The Manitoba Kleine Gemeinde would not follow the example of their counterparts in Meade, and traditional elements continued in the church. However, when the Gemeinde’s bishop, and a large minority of the traditionalists migrated to Mexico in 1948, the Gemeinde, lead by the Steinbach congregation, moved quickly in the doctrinal direction of evangelism. By 1952 the Gemeinde became officially known as the Evangelical Mennonite Church, and in 1960 it adopted its present name, the Evangelical Mennonite Conference.

The fundamentalist American speakers at Winona Lake, typified by Hyman Appelman, were not merely emotional enthusiasts, they represented a militarism, identification with the state, and “he-man” individualism that Peter Friesen, Ben D. Reimer and Archie Penner, in their traditional Mennonite humility and peace background, did not adopt. Penner, especially, was a powerful voice for the theology of peaceful non-resistance, and all three men ministered to conscientious objectors during World War II. But did these three pilgrims play a part in bringing American fundamentalist influences back with them to Manitoba, and therefore also, a measure of alienation both from traditionalists and from “wayward” youth seeking “freedom”? It would seem so.

Endnotes
1 Japan would finally surrender on August 15.
5 Doreen Reimer Peters, One Who Dared, pp. 40-42, p. 72, p. 156.
6 Peter D. Friesen diary, May 27, 1931. After his strike in 1938, he added: “I received a new faith in the Lord my saviour and I accepted him as my saviour too oh glory, hallelujah, praise his name.”
7 Philippians 2:12.
11 Mennonitische Rundschau, January 26, 1898; Royden Loewen, Family, Church, and Market (Toronto: University of Toronto Press), 1993, p. 181.
12 Royden Loewen, Family, Church, and Market, p. 242. Loewen is quoting from Schule’s “Autobiography.”
13 SP, April 13, 1938.
14 SP, May 6, 1942.
15 SP, July 1, 1942.
16 SP, October 18, 1939.
23 Peter D. Friesen diary, July 26 and July 29, 1945.
24 SP, August 8, 1945.
27 Grace Bible Institute was attended by various Steinbach natives over the years, provoking Peter’s cousin, the lawyer Ernie Goossen, to refer to it sarcastically as the “Omaha School for Enthusiastic Folk from Steinbach, (sometimes referred to as the O.S.E.F.S.)” in an October 30, 1954 letter to his sister Esther.
28 SP, August 22, 1945.
29 SP, April 17 and 24, 1946, Peter D. Friesen diary, April 22 and 29, 1946.
30 SP, July 3, 1946.
31 Peter D. Friesen diary, July 17 and 19, 1946; Carillon News, August 8, 1946.
32 Al Reimer, “Revival,” in When War Came to Kleindorp (Rosetta Projects, 2008). Following quotes are also from this story.

Mennonite Immigrants in a Land of First Nations

Leonard Doell, Aberdeen, Saskatchewan

This study of the story of Mennonite people settling in Western Canada focuses particularly on the areas where the paths of Mennonites have intersected with Aboriginal peoples. It will also highlight some of the privileges granted to Mennonite people, so that they can be compared to the treaties Canada made with Aboriginal people.

As early as 1872 the Canadian Government became aware that Russian Mennonites were interested in immigrating to Canada. For a number of reasons the timing was perfect for Mennonites to settle in Manitoba. Ottawa had given provincial status to Manitoba in 1870. In 1871 Treaty One had been signed with the Ojibway and Cree ceding Aboriginal title to their land; the Dominion Land Act allowed for Homestead Grants to be given to settlers; the creation of the NWMP in 1873 assured law and order in the West; and, finally, good transportation was promised in the form of a transcontinental railway.

In 1872 Russian Mennonites met with William Hespeler, whom the Canadian government had given the assignment of recruiting and assisting German speaking immigrants from Eastern Europe. Hespeler’s energetic and aggressive wooing of Mennonite immigrants attracted the unfavourable attention of Russian authorities, and he was expelled from the country. Mennonites were, however, impressed with the promises that were being extended to them, including exemption from
military service and the right to have their own schools. The offer of large tracts of land was also appealing for it allowed them to maintain the semi-communal life they had developed during ninety years in Russia. Sufficient land of good quality, either free or at low prices, the possibility of closed settlements, use of the German language, control of their schools, and local self government appealed to them.3

Canadian authorities provided generous assistance to the Mennonite delegates who came to Canada to inspect the land. John Lowe, Secretary of the Department of Agriculture, outlined in fifteen points the advantages and immunities offered by the Canadian government. Firstly, he reiterated exemption from military service for Mennonites; secondly he confirmed a reserve of eight townships of land east of the Red River, and responded affirmatively to the delegates' request that a reserve of eight townships of land east of the Red River, and called the East Reserve, was fit for settlement. Following some bargaining between Mennonites and the Department of the Interior, the government agreed to a second reserve of 17 townships whose boundaries were ratified in the spring of 1876.6 This land lay to the west of the Red River along the border between the USA and Canada, and was referred to as the West Reserve.

During the winter of 1874 it became obvious to both the Ontario Mennonites and the leaders of the immigration, that the new settlers would need considerable financial help. It was also evident that the resources of the Ontario Mennonites, who had already assisted their Russian brothers and sisters with a loan of $50,000, would be insufficient to meet the need. Accordingly, a deputation of leading Mennonites from Ontario went to Ottawa in 1875 to request from the government a loan of $100,000 to assist the immigrants. This loan was to be repaid in 10 annual installments with the Russian Mennonite Aid Committee in Ontario set up to provide surety for this loan. Some of the money was to be used for the purchase of farm equipment, but most of it was required to buy food for the settlers during the early years.7

The new settlers were not able to meet the repayment schedule, and by 1883 only three payments had been made. Since Ontario Mennonites had posted bonds against this loan, the Treasury Board during 1883 briefly considered having the Justice Department collect the monies due from the bondsmen. The Minister of Agriculture interceded and obtained an agreement from cabinet not to press for immediate payment. The loan was successfully repaid in 1892, with some of the interest forgiven.8

In 1895, a similar request for assistance was made to the Federal Government on behalf of Mennonites moving to the Hague area in what was then the Northwest Territories, but by then government policy on loans had changed and the request was politely refused.9

By 1877 arriving Mennonite settlers had laid out entire villages, erected houses and other buildings and had begun to break the land, all the while having the status of squatters. Many of them had spent their entire capital resources in making these improvements and did not have the ten dollars to pay the homestead entry fee. William Hespeler appealed to the Department of the Interior who honored the request to do without the immediate payment of the application fee in order to help “a most industrious and valuable class of settlers.”10

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William Hespeler, 1830-1921. Photo Credit: Manitoba Archives, Legislative Assembly Collection.

The following story is one of the experiences of the delegation that came to Manitoba in 1873. On June 23, six Mennonite delegates made a trip west of Winnipeg to look at land. The newspaper, Le Metis, reported that on July 1 some Metis, led by a man named McKay, had surrounded the Mennonites who had taken refuge at Hotel House situated at White Horse Plains west of Winnipeg. According to rumors, the Mennonites had been taken prisoner by the Metis.5 Military forces were sent from Winnipeg to rescue the Mennonite delegates. News came back that a drunken fight had lead to the arrest of five Metis men who were jailed following the incident. The Mennonites claimed they were under siege, but other reports dispute this. Either way, the delegates returned home and recommended Canada as their first choice for settlement. During the years 1874-1880, about 7,000 Mennonites moved to Manitoba. In 1881, the census showed that they made up one tenth of Manitoba’s population. Upon arrival in Manitoba it was discovered that only about two-thirds of the eight townships reserved for Mennonites east of the Red River, and called the East Reserve, was fit for settlement. Following some bargaining between Mennonites and the Department of the Interior, the government agreed to a second reserve of 17 townships whose boundaries were ratified in the spring of 1876.6 This land lay to the west of the Red River along the border between the USA and Canada, and was referred to as the West Reserve.
Mennonites had a semi-communal form of land holding. Each family cultivated a strip of land in the village proper on which its dwellings and other buildings were erected. All had a share in the community pasture which was usually situated at one end of the village. The rest of the land was divided into strips, so that all shared, more or less equally, in the good land and the poorer parcels, and in land close to the village and that farther away. 11

The completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1885 and the subsequent construction of spur lines running north and south of it, greatly improved settlement possibilities in the Northwest Territories of Canada. At the same time the second Riel resistance at Batoche finally convinced Ottawa to give more serious attention to the west if settlement of that region was to become a reality. The Canadian government now believed that the settlement of the Northwest Territories of Canada showed itself genuinely accommodating during this period, repeatedly willing to go beyond the letter of agreement. Mennonites, in return, retained a basic respect for government despite difficulties, or lack of co-operation from local officials. 14

The area south of Duck Lake, however, quickly caught on among the Manitoba Mennonites as a suitable area for relocation. Beginning in 1891, Mennonite immigrants, arriving directly from Russia or Prussia, began to give Saskatchewan as their destination. Reinlander Church members from Manitoba communities had hoped to obtain these lands. The two Manitoba reserves remained closed until the 1890s.

In their attitude towards government, Mennonites preferred to deal with the Prime Minister rather than with any of his ministers, or with the Minister of a Department rather than with his Deputies. Their relationship to government focused on their agreement, the Privilegium of 1873. They expected the government to honour it and were prepared to be bound by it. It defined their relationship to the state. They were prepared to be subjects of the realm, but reluctant to accept the privileges and obligations of full citizenship in the nation.

Mennonites tended to assume governmental benevolence, whether it was granting a loan, providing protection from other settlers, or granting hamlet privilege. The Government of Canada showed itself genuinely accommodating during this period, repeatedly willing to go beyond the letter of agreement. Mennonites, in return, retained a basic respect for government despite difficulties, or lack of co-operation from local officials. 14

In return Emilia was also hospitable to her native neighbours. She fed strangers, for example, providing food to Chief Almightyvoice when he stopped at her cabin for food as he fled from police. She shared of the little she had. 15

One of the couples who moved from Germany to Rosthern was Isbrand and Emilia Wieler. Isbrand died shortly after arriving at Rosthern, and Emilia was left in a new country to raise a family of nine children ranging from six months to 16 years. She was by herself with no home, no furniture, and no money. She heard of a deserted homestead near Batoche, where she moved with her family in the spring of 1895. The local Indian people kept the family alive by repeatedly providing them with food. On one occasion, in desperation, Emilia sent her boys to the local chief for help. The ice across the South Saskatchewan River was already beginning to break up and it would soon be impossible to cross to the Hudson Bay store at Duck Lake. Hearing of the desperate plight of this widow with her children, the chief risked his life by crossing the river on the ice floes and arriving at the store at Duck Lake. Then, with laden arms, he crossed the dangerous river again and brought the much needed supplies to Emilia Wieler and her family.

In return Emilia was also hospitable to her native neighbours. She fed strangers, for example, providing food to Chief Almightyvoice when he stopped at her cabin for food as he fled from police. She shared of the little she had. 15

Gerhard Ens was one of the first settlers at Rosthern. He served the community as a businessman, the first MLA and a leader in the local Swedenborgian Church. He also worked as an immigration agent, influencing many to settle in Saskatchewan.
As already noted, in the 1890s the Reinlander Church of Manitoba turned to the Government in Ottawa to establish daughter colonies in Saskatchewan. Two reserves were eventually set aside for Old Colony Mennonites by Order in Council: the Hague Reserve near Rosthern in 1895 and the Swift Current Reserve in 1904. In the initial 1895 reserve, four Townships were set aside near Hague, and an additional five Townships were added in August of 1898. In October of 1898, another eleven Townships were set aside for Mennonite settlement for a period of five years.

The latter addition to the Mennonite Reserve included the Young Chippewayan Indian Reserve near Laird. This land was taken from them without their knowledge, surrender, or consent. In 2011 the band is still seeking compensation for their loss. Mennonites were able to homestead the even numbered sections and purchase the odd numbered sections from the railroad companies. They were also granted the hamlet provision as they had been in Manitoba, and thus could establish villages.

In his article, “Whose land did the Mennonites get?,” University of Manitoba Professor Leo Driedger raises some serious questions for Mennonites about the land conflicts that are a part of their history. He describes the life on the Canadian Prairies before and around the time of Confederation in 1867. The majority of the 10,000 inhabitants of the Red River valley were French or English Metis whose way of life was dominated by the buffalo culture and fur trade. Driedger recounts the resistance in the Red River settlement in 1870, and the later one in Saskatchewan in 1885 led by Louis Riel. He says that the Mennonite settlements followed in the train of Metis defeats.

Emilia Wieler family. The Wieler family was sustained by their Aboriginal neighbours after they moved to a homestead near Batoche when their husband and father, Isbrand died. Photo Credit: Leonard Doell.

Chief Almighty Voice (1875-1897). Almighty Voice became a fugitive in October 1895 after he shot one of his head of cattle without the permission of the Indian Agent. He escaped and while a fugitive shot and killed a NWMP officer. He continued to avoid capture for the next 18 months. Almighty Voice was shot and killed by the NWMP on May 30, 1897 on a bluff near the One Arrow First Nation.
The preconditions for Mennonite settlements were consistent with what the Canadian Government wanted to promote. The preconditions for Mennonite settlements were consistent with what the Canadian Government wanted to promote. The aims of the Indians and Metis were opposite to the new government settlement policy. Homesteading was an infringement on the free hunting and fishing rights that they had enjoyed under the Hudson Bay Company for 200 years and before. Settlement would drive away the fur bearing animals and destroy the buffalo, their main economic base. The railroad would diminish their hold on ox cart and boat transportation throughout the west.

There are few recorded incidents where Mennonites, and Indians or Metis, actually confronted each other with their different lifestyles. The reason is that the government and the CPR representatives were usually the middlemen. They cleared out the Indians and made it possible for the European settlers to move in. Did Mennonites compromise their principle of non-resistance by accepting land and protection from a government which used violence to get them these advantages?17

Emma Larocque, a Metis woman from Alberta who studied at the Mennonite Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana, offers a similar perspective. “In Southern Manitoba,” she writes, “the Canadian government recruited Mennonites and gave them Metis land as one of the ways of hastening white settlement on the Prairies. Could God have led the Mennonites to displace the Metis? Could God have led the Mennonites to displace the Aboriginal peoples of South America? The presence of Mennonites, and other groups, has made it much easier for governments to dispossess native peoples. Mennonites and others have also not been adverse to accepting government grants, lands and resources which morally belonged to Aboriginal peoples.”18

Mennonites, from their perspective, like to believe that the Indians got their share, and they, in turn gained clear title to the land. Mennonites need to remember that Aboriginal views of land and ownership were foreign to European understanding, and that land negotiations, following the system of the colonizers, were, at best, strange to the Aboriginals. The idea of selling, the method of measuring, the nature of the contract, the settling of prices, and the lawyers all emerged from the white man’s society, which handled the whole deal and pocketed the profits. In the meantime, the Indian was crowded into corners of what was once his unlimited space.19

According to James Urry, Mennonites in Russia related well to their indigenous neighbours as long as Mennonites raised sheep for a living. In the 1850’s, when Australia began to take over sheep production and Mennonites in Russia changed to cattle and grain production, conflicts arose. Fields were now defined by boundaries and private property was emphasized. This same pattern repeated itself in Canada and South America.

During the years 1916 to 1930, the federal and provincial governments broke many of the promises made in the Privilegium with the Mennonites. The province forced the closure of Mennonite private schools and Mennonites lost the use of their language and their curriculum in their schools. As well, the government forced English public schools into the villages, expropriated land, named schools after World War 1 battle sites, and fined and jailed Mennonites for not sending their
children to school. The result was that thousands of Mennonites emigrated to Mexico and Paraguay.

In 1930, the Saskatchewan government set up a scheme to help the destitute. It was designed for people who were familiar with local methods of farming, but who could not afford to buy land. The plan enabled settlers to move to northern communities and to obtain advances for the purchase of building materials and fuel to clear the land. The costs of the program were shared by the federal, provincial and municipal governments. Many Mennonites were assisted in this back-to-the-land movement to places like Swan Plain, Carrot River and Meadow Lake in Saskatchewan, to Burns Lake in B.C. and to LaCrete in Alberta. These movements, in most cases, placed them as close neighbours to Metis and First Nation peoples. These are some stories of their interaction.

In the 1930’s, the Aron Derksens moved to Swan Plain and had many dealings with their native neighbours. They borrowed things back and forth and shared what they had. Mennonites were poor, but native people were even poorer. One day a native couple came onto the yard of the Derksens and wanted to borrow a wagon. Mrs. Derksen was home and told them to talk to her husband who was working on a field nearby. They came back and Mr. Derksen helped Mr. and Mrs. Blackbird, who were both in their 80s, to hitch up a buggy to their lone horse. Mr. Derksen adjusted the harness and got it ready. Before they were going to leave, Mrs. Blackbird pulled a crooked pipe from her pocket and pointed to the tobacco in Mr. Derksen’s pocket. He handed her the pouch and she filled her pipe. He then lit it for her. The Blackbirds took off in a cloud of smoke and returned the buggy in a few days when they were done with it.

Sometimes the Derksens noticed that the cows gave less milk than normal, and suspected that their neighbours needed some and had helped themselves. But there was always enough for everyone. The Derksens planted an extra-large garden so that they could share garden produce with neighbours in need.

On one cold day in 1936 or 1937, Katie Kasper (nee Fehr) of Pierceland, said that three Indian men came to their home. The children had never seen an Indian before, but her Papa opened the door and let them in. Katie was eleven years old and the oldest of her siblings. The children were very afraid, but Papa said that they were alright. The native men could not speak English, but they passed a note saying that they were very cold and hungry, and asked if they could have something to eat. Papa told them to sit at the table. He told Katie to set the table for them and to warm up what was left of their dinner. Mama said that we would need that for our supper, but Papa said, “Do as I say and you will see that they will give us more than they eat here.” They ate all that was put on the table: potatoes, gravy, bread and coffee, and were very thankful when they left. Papa then gave them a coat, cap and mittens, Mama was sure that we would never see them again. Two weeks later Mama saw them drive onto the yard and she said, “There are your Indians again.” Papa went outside to meet them. We all watched in joyous surprise as they helped Papa carry in half a deer, our first meat in a very long time. Papa made a sign for them to sit and eat, but they smiled and made a sign, “No.” They had to go and cut up their meat and smoke it. Years later, Katie married a man who would always help Indians whenever he could, and told her that if it had not been for the Indians he would have starved to death. Katie developed a deep love and appreciation for Indian people and served as an MCC gardener in Sachigo Lake, Ontario in the 1970’s. She still maintains contact with some of her friends there.

There is the story of the Carcajou flood that took place in northern Alberta in 1934. The Mennonite settlers had been warned by the non-Mennonite people that the late spring break-up could result in spring flooding. They did not heed the warning, and therefore were not ready when the flood occurred.

It was in the latter part of April when the ice-choked Peace River finally started to break up. It was closely watched by the natives who were well-acquainted with the river. As predicted,
an ice jam occurred and the waters rose rapidly. The settlers were then advised by the natives to pick up their belongings and move to higher ground. Not quite believing what they heard, the Braun’s and the Unruh’s just picked up the bare essentials and left by wagon. Surely they thought, they would be back by midnight. But it was not a joke.

When they had unhitched and tied up their horses, they already saw huge slabs of ice rise upwards on the river and then crash down into pieces. It looked fierce, but it still did not deter them from returning home for the night. When a Cree Indian saw them returning, he frantically tried to explain to them that there definitely would be a flood. Not knowing what he had said, they left the man in his frustration and all went to bed.22

They were to find out later what the Cree meant when a rider pulled up at their door at midnight and told them the water was coming. They quickly lashed their cattle to trees and left by wagon again for higher ground where they had camped earlier in the evening. They tried to get some rest but it wasn’t easy. “We listened to the crashing ice below,” wrote Maria Braun. “We were afraid the river would spill over and likely cover our flat.” By morning the men went out to investigate and they could see that the only way they could get to the flat was by boat. They found that animals had swum to safety and some chickens were sitting on logs that were floating across farmyards. The Hieberts and Wielers, who had heeded the call of the Cree, had taken their cattle, feed and other belongings during the night to higher ground. They remarked later that when the last load had been taken, the wagon wheels had been half under water. It is said that if the Old Indian man’s warning had been heeded, they could have spent the whole day getting everything to safety.

All those who had to retreat from the Carcajou flat remained on the hilltop for a number of days. They spent this time in a building which they called a school house near the Indian village. They stayed there until the water had dropped far enough to get to their farms again. Meanwhile one of the Braun’s cows freshened in the bush. They now had lots of milk which greatly helped their diet. They shared the milk with the Indian couple who had given Mother Braun a pair of moose hide slippers so she would not have to go barefoot anymore.23

In 1940, twenty-five Old Colony Mennonite families from the Swift Current and Hague areas were assisted by the Saskatchewan and British Columbia governments in resettling from drought stricken areas to new farm land near Burns Lake, BC. The BC government provided them with the use of provincial lands and the Saskatchewan government provided funds for transportation and subsistence, if necessary, for a period of three years. Over time, more Mennonites made this area near Burns Lake, Vanderhoof and Chelsatta their home.

The Chelsatta area is the traditional home of the Carrier people, who were self-sufficient, making a living from trap lines, hunting and fishing. In April 1952, the construction of the Kemano Dam forced the relocation of these people from their homes. The Carrier people were given four days’ notice that Alcan’s new dam would raise the water level, flooding their villages forever. With little other choice, confused and angry, members gathered what possessions they could manage, and walked to higher ground. Those who had been out hunting, or on the trap-line, returned to find their homes destroyed and their people gone. When Carla Lewis told me this story, she said that the Mennonites and other non-Aboriginal neighbours were given much more notice than her people received. In addition, the compensation the non-Aboriginal people received from the government was significantly higher. One of the saddest parts of the flood was the coffins, grave houses and skeletal remains that were found floating down the river after their land was flooded.

It has been said that Mennonites do not have a flag or country, but have a history. Mennonites, like Aboriginal people, are a people. Born in the upheaval of the Reformation, forged in the fire of persecution in Switzerland, the Netherlands, and Moravia, shaped and grounded in the Vistula Delta, the Ukraine, Saskatchewan, and beyond, Mennonites have become a people. Like the ancient Israelites and the Cree, they recognize the hand of God in the creation of their people. Mennonites too have resisted assimilation into societies and peoples whose ways are foreign and sometimes contrary to their deeply held convictions.24

While Mennonites do not have one particular land to call their homeland, land has been an important theme for them. It has sometimes been suggested that some Mennonite migrations were prompted as much by the pull of cheap farmland as by the push of persecution. This is not to suggest that land was only important to Mennonites as a commodity. There was and is the deeply rooted feeling that to have one’s hands in the soil is the surest way of keeping alive one’s faith in the Creator Provider.25

Mennonites have also received large tracts of land from governments throughout Canada, and in other parts of the world. They have received concessions that their Aboriginal neighbours have not received. At times they have also been promised concessions that have never been fulfilled. Mennonites share the same desire as Aboriginal people to keep and protect the lands promised to them. Mennonites need to acknowledge, though, that they came very close to making treaties with the state that had privileged status attached to them. The idea that Indian people received free lands while Mennonites had to work for theirs is highly erroneous and thoroughly misleading.

In addition to this, Mennonites have been privileged to have the freedom to travel without harassment, with perhaps the exception of the World Wars when Germany was Canada’s enemy. Mennonites were free to market their agricultural products. They even created their own co-operatives. They
were given the freedom to establish their own schools, teach their children in their own language and with their own curriculum, although this became contentious when governments reneged on this promise. The government, especially during World War II, also tried to limit the exemption from military service promised to Mennonites.

Mennonites share a common sense of peoplehood and homeland with Aboriginal people, a tribal consciousness you may call it. Both experienced attempts by more powerful peoples or hostile structures to stamp out their peoplehood. While Mennonites in the Soviet Union were experiencing the hardships of famine, civil war and anarchy, the Canadian government passed an Order-in-Council forbidding the admission of Mennonites, because they could not be assimilated within a reasonable time. Up to 1951, native people in Canada were effectively prevented from using the courts to pursue their claims to land by a section of the Indian Act which made it an offence to raise funds to prosecute or pursue a land claim.

There are significant differences in the journeys of Mennonites and Aboriginals, but there are also common threads. They share a sense of peoplehood, experiences of oppression, dispersion, being at the mercy of governments, and a love for the land. These commonalities put Mennonites and Aboriginals in an advantageous position to understand each other.26

Endnotes
1 Adolf Ens, Subjects or Citizens? (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1994).
2 Ibid, 13.
3 Ibid, 20.
6 Ens, Subjects or Citizens?, 23.
7 Ibid, 24.
8 Ibid, 25.
9 Ibid, 27.
11 Ibid, 35.
12 Ibid, 35.
13 Ibid, 41.
14 Ibid, 47.
15 Helen Buhr Regier, The Wieler Diary, October 1980, Given to Leonard Doell by Verner Friesen
17 Ibid.
20 Cornelius Derksen, Interview with Leonard Doell 13 March 2006.
25 Ibid, p.3.
26 Ibid, p.3.

Abandoned Railway Town-sites or Stations in, or near, the Mennonite West Reserve

Bruce Wiebe, Winkler

As railway construction progressed into western Canada, it was accompanied by the development of towns as centers of commerce. Some of these towns remained merely dreams, while others existed briefly and then died prematurely. Many flourished. This paper will examine the early documentation of those that were actual surveyed town-sites, but remained dreams or were abandoned. Of these town-sites, Stephen was the first to be established in 1882, while the others followed later in 1906 and 1907. All except Glencross were town-sites established by developers, including the CPR, much of the activity at the western edge of the Reserve was led by speculators independent of the railway. Fortunately for the speculators, the cohesiveness of the Mennonite Reserve was being tested at its western villages such as Schoendorf. Wilhelm Janzen who arrived in 1876 filed for a homestead on the North-West Quarter of Section 2, Township 3, Range 5 West. He was initially listed in the Reinlaender Gemeinde records at that time, but after 1880 he no longer appeared as their member. In November 1881, the last year he was assessed taxes in Schoendorf by the Gebietsamt, he deeded to the Canadian Pacific Railway a 100 foot wide Right of Way across his property to which he had not yet, and never did receive, Patent. In March 1882 he deeded this quarter section to William Beech and Isaac Fairchild both of Emerson for $2,000. For $2,000 Fairchild immediately signed a Quit Claim in favour of Beech and on 23 March, 1882 Beech deeded the land to George Walton of Emerson for $5,000.

Walton had come to Manitoba from Ontario in 1879 and went into the hardware business with Robert Bird, operating stores in both Emerson and Manitoba City. In February 1883 they received the contract for supplying three carloads of bolts, nuts, and small ironwork for construction of the Emerson railway bridge over the Red River. By January 1884 the partnership was bankrupt and the assets had been assigned to a liquidator. In January 1890 the Southern Manitoba Times began publishing at Emerson under the management of George Walton, but by 1892 he was advertising his services as an auctioneer. In 1900 he moved to Winnipeg, and in 1907 was elected to the Manitoba Legislature as a Liberal representing Emerson Constituency. He was defeated in 1910 and lost again in the 1914 election.

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However, when Walton acquired the NW ¼-2-3-5 in 1882, he appeared to have the financial resources for the $5,000 purchase, as well as money to survey into lots the quarter section which was then registered in April.\(^\text{11}\) The sheer size of the surveyed town-site was optimistic, ambitious and, as events would prove, speculative. In early April of that year, he had deeded to the C.P.R. 4.2 acres immediately to the north of their existing right-of-way for the purposes of constructing a siding. This 136 foot wide and 1,350 foot long tract was given to them for a nominal $1. Rails for the siding were laid and a box car without wheels temporarily served as a station.\(^\text{12}\) This was the new town-site of Stephen, grandly named after George Stephen, President of the Canadian Pacific Railway.

George Walton, however, had been busy with more than just his hardware business. It was reported that he travelled from Nova Scotia to British Columbia selling most of the lots in Stephen by public auction realizing $7,000 in the process.\(^\text{13}\) However, this report appears greatly exaggerated based on available documents and the fact that he was bankrupt by 1884. He did, nevertheless, have success in the Canadian Maritimes where in May of 1882 alone it is known that he sold 60 lots to 14 individuals most of whom purchased four lots apiece. Where details are known, Walton received $795 for 46 lots, or an average of $17.28 per lot.

If he had been able to sell all the lots in Stephen, which could have totalled approximately 1,300 based on the 25 foot lot widths common at that time, he could have grossed in excess of $22,000. However, only 50 individuals, almost all of them non-resident speculators, are identifiable as purchasers: from Halifax 22, St. John 13, Charlottetown 5, Wichita 3, and Chicago 2. The remaining five, who could have been local residents at the time of purchase, were: John Wardrop of Toronto, W.W. Ireland of Carberry, David Tobias of Morden, and William Beech and Mary Bird of Emerson. Bird will likely have had some connection to Walton’s partner in the hardware business, Robert Bird. Beech, who had made a quick profit in his purchase of the quarter section of land from Janzen, with a resale to Walton, was now in possession of several entire blocks of Stephen.

The eastern Canadian speculators included shipping master Howard Bligh, dentist William C. Delaney, and barrister Charles H. Smith all of Halifax, and Baker Alexander Rankine, merchant Isaac C. Bowman, and Reverend Duncan C. Currie all of St. John, New Brunswick. Reverend Alex Yonker and Freeman Lane from Chicago, as well as three men with surname Kitchen from Wichita, Kansas, were the American buyers.

The existence of a railway siding at the western edge of the Mennonite Reserve presented a golden opportunity to corner the grain market as farmers took advantage of local delivery and spared themselves the long two-day round trip wagon or sleigh ride to Emerson.\(^\text{14}\) Entrepreneurs, mostly unnamed, took advantage of the potential for commerce of all kinds, and an immediate building boom saw three stores and a hotel built at Stephen in 1882.\(^\text{15}\) William Beech’s opportunity was the color of the golden grain, and by January 1883 he had already purchased 47,000 bushels.\(^\text{16}\) Mennonites patronized the town in large numbers, delivering so much grain that three rail car loads were being shipped daily in March.\(^\text{17}\) Another two buildings were constructed that month.\(^\text{18}\) A 400 foot long grain shed had already been built and was filled to capacity.\(^\text{19}\) Between January 1 and March 23, 1883 about $40,000 had been paid to farmers at Stephen for their grain and on one Friday alone at the end of March, five rail cars were shipped.\(^\text{20}\) Passenger business on the railway began to increase as well.\(^\text{21}\) Not surprisingly, the arrival of a train on the ‘till now transportation deficient prairie, was a novelty which attracted many onlookers.\(^\text{22}\)

The future appeared momentarily bright for this speculator’s town-site of Stephen, but George Walton, William Beech, and others had not anticipated the unparalleled power of the Canadian Pacific Railway, or the interests of the non-Mennonite

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**A deed for one of the land sales in Stephen made by George Walton to Stephen Hall of New Brunswick. Source: Manitoba Land Titles.**

**The Manitoba Free Press of March 30, 1883 reports on the initial success of Stephen.**
homesteaders located several miles to the west at Cheval Creek. As noted, in April 1882 Walton had given the C.P.R land to construct a siding, and they had done so. However, the C.P.R had its own agenda and little regard for speculators operating independent of them. The town-site of Stephen offered them little gain other than rail traffic. Furthermore, the site was lacking the two essentials required during the era of steam power, water and wood, although a seasonal water course traversed the section south of the rail line. Both essentials were available slightly further to the west at Cheval Creek and the C.P.R recognized the profit potential if they participated in a town-site development under their own control.

Accordingly, on March 27, 1883, to the detriment of Stephen, John H. McTavish the Land Commissioner of the C.P.R signed an agreement with Wilmot and Franklin Morden whereby the Railway Company expressed its intention to place a railway station and siding on land owned by the two, and to lay out a town-site. Wilmot had homesteaded the NE-5-3-5 and Franklin the NW-5-3-5. The Mordens for their part agreed to furnish to the Railway free of charge sufficient lands for the siding and station grounds and all odd numbered blocks included in the survey.

The C.P.R now had every reason to promote a town site at Cheval Creek. Indeed, apparently in anticipation of this development, Ogilvie and Company erected a 5,000 bushel grain warehouse there in early March and grain was immediately being purchased. By May 1883 the future of Stephen was seriously in doubt. Shortly thereafter, the death knell sounded when the siding was reportedly removed and relocated to Section 5. In March 1884 the first Plan of Survey was registered for the latter site named Mordenville. Here the C.P.R had fulfilled their part of the agreement, and a railway station and siding were already in existence. Buildings were being moved there from Stephen, but at least one dwelling, that of Jacob Nickel, was moved several miles north to Burwalde.

The town-site of Stephen ceased to exist and nothing remained to distinguish it from other quarter sections of land. Neither George Walton, nor any of the 50 lot owners paid taxes to the Rural Municipality of Rhineland, which in their 1884 property assessment records still showed Wilhelm Janzen of Schoendorf as the owner. Even though Janzen no longer was an adherent of the Reinlaender Gemeinde, and George Walton was the deed holder of record, the fact remained that the nonexistent town-site of Stephen was situated within the parameters of the Mennonite West Reserve, and their interests would not be neglected.

Furthermore, Wilhelm Janzen was indebted to the Russian Mennonite Aid Committee of Waterloo, Ontario and their representative Jacob Y. Shantz for the sum of $907.79. In 1887 the Municipality sold the quarter section for taxes owing, and Reinland Gemeinde Vorsteher Franz Froese purchased this land for $20.13. In July of the same year, Janzen repaid his obligation to the Mennonite Aid Committee of Waterloo by signing a Quit Claim Deed in favour of Jacob Y. Shantz. The Canadian Department of the Interior thereupon issued a Patent dated 10 September 1887 for the entire NW-2-3-5 in Shantz’s name, and at the latter’s request sent it directly to Franz Froese at Reinland Manitoba. In October 1889 Shantz deeded the quarter section to Franz Froese for $1,450 and the following month the Rural Municipality of Rhineland passed a by-law cancelling the Plan of Stephen.

In January 1890 Froese applied to have the property brought under the Real Property Act and directed that the title was to be issued to Alexander Lawrence of Morden. This title, in Lawrence’s name, was issued in May 1891, but prior to doing so William Beech had to sign a Quit Claim Deed for $50 releasing his interest. The other Canadian and American speculators, who thought they were lot owners in Stephen, were all notified and given opportunity to file a caveat. They chose not to so, or withdrew their objections once aware of the unlikelihood of collecting any money.

Mordenville, renamed Morden, prospered but it was only in 1892 that another town-site, named Winkler, was founded several miles within the West Reserve. Stephen, its predecessor, had long since faded from the collective memory of both communities.

**Americans invade the West Reserve**

As settlers poured into western Canada, American railway interests coveted the lucrative grain trade that was developing. Although the C.P.R. held a virtual monopoly on rail construction, the Manitoba government in 1903 granted a charter to the Midland Railway Company of Manitoba to construct rail lines. The Midland was jointly owned by two American railroads, the Great Northern and the Northern Pacific, and was specifically organized to build within the province. In 1906 Midland constructed a line from Neche, North Dakota through Gretna and on to Portage la Prairie. In the following year it constructed a line from Walhalla, North Dakota to Morden.

Following on the heels of these lines were the McCabe brothers, grain merchants of Duluth, Minnesota, who incorporated in Manitoba in July 31, 1906 to gain access to the grain market. In anticipation of development occasioned by the grain trade, the Midland Railway promoted the survey of town-sites, and this led to the incorporation of the Manitoba Development Company in Manitoba on June 25, 1907.

The Winnipeg law firm of Fisher, Wilson, and Ewart, which became Fisher, Wilson, Battram, and Hamilton in mid-1907, was legal counsel to both the Midland Railway and the Manitoba Development Company. Some of the partners held positions on both boards of directors. For example, James Fisher was President of both. The railway town-sites that developed inside the Mennonite West Reserve were Bergman, Haskett and a station at Glencross, while the town-site of Kronsing was less than a mile outside the northern limit of the Reserve.

Although it was just north of Roland, and not adjacent to the Mennonite settlement area, Graham was another nearby Midland Railway town-site. It is noteworthy that among the powers granted to the Midland Railway under its 1903 Charter was the right “to construct and operate an electric telephone line or lines.” The Manitoba Development Company had as one of its objectives, “To purchase, erect, construct, and improve hotels on the lands of the company.”

Until 1905 the original route survey had the railway from Portage la Prairie to the United States border veer south at Roland through Winkler, but when construction began in 1906 it actually ran from Gretna diagonally to Roland through Plum Coulee. Winnipeg lawyer James Fisher was President of the Midland, but real control rested with James J. Hill, President of the Great Northern Railway. The Manitoba Free Press of April 7, 1906 in a full page article with the headline, “The
Great Northern’s invasion of Canada’s Western Wheat Fields” provided a comprehensive overview of James Hill’s railway projects and included a map of the Midland lines.

By December 27, 1906, the Neche to Portage rail line was complete, and the first passenger train made an inspection run, with full service commencing in early 1907. By January 1925, on its daytime southbound run, the train was scheduled to arrive at Kronsgart at 10:40, Plum Coulee at 11:01, Bergman at 11:21, West Gretna at 11:45, and Neche at 12:01.

Stations for passengers and freight were built by the railway, but not always without delays as evidenced in December 1907, when construction halted at Morden for a time because workmen on the depot had not been paid for six weeks by the Northern Construction Company. However, the station was apparently completed by early February 1908, before the Midland telegraph system was inaugurated at that location. Also in December 1907, three liens were filed against the Haskett Station of the Midland Railway for materials supplied to the Northern Construction Company. J. H. Ashdown of Winnipeg claimed $338 for builder’s hardware, the Grand Forks Lumber Company of that city claimed $465 for lumber, and the Newbigin Lumber Company of Tacoma, Washington claimed $372 for 149,000 shingles.

As already stated, the Midland Railway promoted strategically placed town-sites along its lines through the June 25, 1907 incorporation of the Manitoba Development Company, but it had already begun land acquisitions and surveys in 1906 in the names of its subsequent shareholders. Although the first company directors at the time of incorporation were partners in the Winnipeg law firm Fisher, Wilson, and Ewart, these were quickly replaced by five American shareholders from Iowa.

Sidney H. Bevins was a banker from Hawkeye. M. C. Farrell was a cashier from Waucoma, Charles Webster was a broker from Waucoma and was also involved with lumber companies and in the construction of telephone exchanges. Colonel Truman A. Potter from Mason City was a banker and general manager of the Western Electric Telephone Company, and also involved in real estate. Canadian born Christopher T. Haskett, from Fredricksburg, was in real estate. Officers of the Manitoba Development Company were Haskett, president, Farrell, secretary, and Bevins, treasurer. Capital stock was $100,000.

In April 1906, it was reported that the Midland Railway had purchased property for a town-site to be called Roosevelt located nine miles north-east of Winkler, and equidistant from Winkler, Roland, and Plum Coulee. This is the first reference to what became known as Kronsgart. Whether the name Roosevelt, after President Theodor Roosevelt, was actually considered for the town-site by the Americans, or whether this was an erroneous spelling of a name adopted from the nearby School District of Rosewell, is unknown.

Other town-site developments all followed a similar pattern. Surveys of Kronsgart, Bergman, and Graham were attested to by the Surveyor in December 1906, followed by Haskett in June 1907. Fronting the Midland railway, each town-site had a Railway Avenue. Parallel to it, Kronsgart had Manitoba and Royal Avenues, Bergman had Potter and Queens Avenues, and Haskett had Rhineland Avenue. Potter Avenue in Bergman appears to be named after shareholder Truman Potter. Except for a Main Street in each town-site, other streets perpendicular to it were numbered.
Land for each of these towns was purchased prior to the Manitoba Development Company being incorporated, and therefore transfers from the existing landowners were made to individuals connected with the Development Company. Kronsgart on NE-6-4-3 West was sold by Gerhard Dyck to subsequent company treasurer Sidney Bevins. Bergman, 4 miles west of Altona on NW-3-2-2 West, was sold by Cornelius Bergman to Bevins. Haskett was sold by Bernhard Krahn to James Fisher the Winnipeg lawyer who represented the company and was listed as its President at incorporation. Fisher subsequently transferred the land to Bevins as well. Several lot sales to individuals took place prior to Bevins transferring the remainder to the Manitoba Development Company after its registration.

The only lot ever sold in Bergman was to the Altona blacksmith Henry Latozke, while no lots were ever sold in Graham. In Kronsgart, only 17 out of 60 lots in the first 3 Blocks appear to have been sold, apparently mainly for their commercial potential. In addition to two houses that were built, by the spring of 1908 a general store, lumberyard, machine shop, post office, grain elevator, and a hotel, were open for business in Kronsgart. 41 The latter, known as the Midland Hotel, was built fronting the railway on Lots 23 and 24 of Block 2. These lots were owned by implement dealer John H. Unger of Plum Coulee. Unger, who was also a Justice of the Peace, applied for and was awarded a liquor license for the hotel in August, 1907. 42

The existence of a liquor serving establishment was not well received by some area Mennonites. In May, 1908 Jacob B. Penner reported that it was not frequented by local farmers and opined that Christians did not belong there. A true Christian should not enter a building where Jesus was not to be found and no one would dispute that Jesus was not in such a building. 43 Only five months later Penner, likely with some relief, reported that the Midland Hotel burned to the ground. He blamed the cause of the fire on the alcoholic beverages because the bartender had left the lantern in the cellar while retrieving the beverages and the fire began there. 44

This was not the only controversy concerning the hotel in Kronsgart. Virden Conservative MLA John H. Agnew was the provincial treasurer when Unger’s liquor license was issued and he was accused of stifling protests when the License Commissioners met to consider the application. Unger was being rewarded for being a Conservative party supporter, and he was now making money from it, despite protests heard as to the conduct of the hotel. The fact that Unger was also a Justice of the Peace was perceived as a conflict of interest and prompted a writer to note that, “The peculiar combination of Justice of the Peace and hotelkeeper is probably in Mr. Agnew’s view, a very proper one, for if the hotelkeeper should break the law, the Justice of the Peace could bring him before himself, plead guilty, repent, be pardoned and be ready for business the next day.” 45 Subsequently, on June 19, 1908 Unger resigned his appointment as Justice of the Peace. 46

Some of the other original Kronsgart lot purchasers were lumber dealers Louis Marks of Plum Coulee and John C. Graham of Winnipeg, whose lumberyard was owned by the Corona Lumber Company by 1910. Jacob Reichert and Jacob Gafka were merchants whose establishment was owned by John J. Loewen of Winkler. By 1912, Plum Coulee merchant David C. Peters owned 4 Lots, elevator man Henry Loewen of Gretna owned 1½, Gretna merchant Jacob Buhr and Rhineland R.M. farmer John Buhr together owned 3, Jacob Reimer, also a farmer from Rhineland, owned 1½, and Plum Coulee area farmer Klaas Enns purchased Lot 2 in Block 1. In 1913 this latter property was acquired by the McCabe Elevator Company as a residence for their local agent.

Although some of these lots were resold to other individuals, in January 1911 the balance of the town-site was transferred to Chris Haskett personally, immediately prior to the Manitoba Development Company surrendering its Charter. 47 For $1, and unspecified other considerations, Haskett then transferred title to Frank Beard, a farmer in Mason City, Iowa, but took back a mortgage of $4,500. Between 1918 and 1923 the various lots in Kronsgart excluding the McCabe Elevator agent residence, but including those owned by Frank Beard, reverted to the Rural Municipality of Roland for non-payment of taxes and were then sold to Jacob B. Penner.

Penner sold 4 lots to Henry J. Banman, who moved the Old Colony Mennonite church building from the village of Hamburg and converted it into a retail store. 48 He also sold all of Block 1, excluding the McCabe residence, to grain buyer Frank Ritter from whom it was acquired by Henry J. Banman, before it was transferred to John Hamm. Although this list of later Kronsgart property owners is not complete, the foregoing does provide an overview of the abandonment of the town-site, and its reversion to the local municipality and to local ownership.

Bergman followed a similar pattern with the entire town-site, except Henry Latozke’s lot, transferred to Chris Haskett in 1913 after the Manitoba Development Company surrendered its charter. The town-site was then immediately transferred to shareholders Chris Haskett, Truman Potter, Charles Webster, and Sidney Bevins, and resold to Minneapolis real estate dealer Michael Keys. In 1917 the entire town-site reverted to the Rural Municipality of Rhineland for non-payment of taxes. At Graham, Chris Haskett remained the owner of record from 1912 till 1920 when the entire town-site was sold to William Wilson.

The Haskett townsite had significantly greater success in growth and longevity, but it too was followed by a period of decline until only a few houses remained. For a history of that community refer to Alan Warkentine’s article in Preservings #28 and the sources he cites. But as noted above, the property was purchased from Bernhard Krahn by James Fisher, transferred to Sidney Bevins and then to the Manitoba Development Company which registered the Plan of Survey on October 11, 1907.

Some initial lot purchasers were Daniel Doell, Peter M. Elias, Alex Kennedy, and Ephraim Wolfson. In 1908 the Rural Municipality of Rhineland assessed taxes to Elias and his partner Wm. M. Elias, Wolfson, Kennedy and Doell plus Jacob Reimer, Johan Sawatzky, Heinrich Dyck, J. A. Klassen, Jacob Fast, and the personal effects of grain buyer Fred Lischifky. It also assessed the McCabe Elevator Company $800. 49 The Manitoba Development Company in 1910 transferred the majority of its unsold lots to Chris Haskett personally, who resold several to individuals before selling many to New Hampton, Iowa farmer Theodor Laures in 1920. He sold the remainder to local entrepreneur William M. Elias in 1921. Laures also sold his lots to Elias in 1921, and in 1925 Elias acquired more lots from the Manitoba Development Company by purchase through tax sale. Beginning in 1921, Elias began to resell lots to individuals and thus became the defacto developer of Haskett.

As already mentioned, the 1903 Charter of the Midland Railway included the right to construct and operate telephone lines. January 1905 a bill was introduced in the Manitoba
Legislature to incorporate a company in Winnipeg to be known as the Independent Telephone Company of Canada. Among the seven incorporators were Charles Webster and Colonel Truman A. Potter as well as others identifiable as Americans. Both Webster and Potter were shareholders of the Manitoba Development Company, but their involvement in any such telephone venture has not been researched by this author. Such research might well yield interesting results, since the men were present in Manitoba, as noted by the *Manitoba Free Press*.

The significance of the grain trade to the Midland Railway was evident by the July 31, 1906 incorporation of the McCabe Elevator Company, before either road was completed. By August 15 materials were on site for construction of grain elevators at Gretna and Bergman, with the intention of their completion in time to handle the current year’s crop. These Duluth Minnesota based grain merchants also built other elevators, as well as coal sheds, at Plum Coulee, Kronsgart, Roland, Graham, Haskett, Glencross, and Morden. Some buildings were located on property purchased outright by the company, but most were adjacent to the railway on land leased from the Midland.

At Glencross station, southwest of the village of Chortitz, the elevator and coal sheds were located on the west half of 11-2-5 West. Presumably intended for the residence of their agent, the McCabe Elevator Company owned one acre in the extreme south-western corner of the northeast quarter of Section 11. This land was sold for taxes in 1960, long after the railway had been abandoned.

Like Stephen, the American incursion of the Mennonite West Reserve is long forgotten, but the name Haskett remains as a reminder of the dreams of men such as Haskett, Bevins, Farrell, Webster, and Potter.

**End Notes**

Other than the endnotes listed, the sources for all data are the Abstracts, Old System Files, RPA Files, Transfers, and Certificates of Title at the Morden or Winnipeg Land Titles Offices affecting the legal descriptions cited. The following Old System file numbers for Deeds from Walton to purchasers of Lots in Stephen are listed because they are otherwise not traceable: 1620, 1621, 1622, 1643, 1644, 1645, 1646, 1652, 1662, 1663, 1685.

2. The Survey Plan of Gretna is dated October 1, 1882 by the CPR Land Department, but was only filed at Land Titles January 27, 1883 as No. 28.
3. Mennonite Heritage Center Archives (MHCA) Homestead files microfilm. The exact location of Stephen using today’s landmarks would place it between Winkler and Morden south of Highway # 3 and north of the CPR Railway tracks where the current Manitoba Hydro and P. J. Trailers buildings are located. Small stones consistent with ballast for the railroad are still evident in the open field directly south of P. J. Trailers.
4. Ca 1877 list of Reinlaender Gemeinde members #953, Mexico Mennonite records collection photocopied by this author. Original in possession of the Old Colony Mennonite Church deacon at Cuauhtemoc, Mexico.
5. Mexico Mennonite records collection photocopied by this author. Original in possession of the Colony administration, Cuauhtemoc, Mexico.
6. MDFP Jan 14, 1884. Microfilm at Legislative Library.
7. MDFP Feb 3, 1883.
8. MDFP Jan 14, 1884, March 3, 1884.
11. The Survey Plan of Stephen was dated April 17, 1882 and registered at Land Titles No. 969, 1882.

*Source: Manitoba Land Titles*
A Personal Reflection on Thirty-Five Years of Migration Work

Bill Janzen, Ottawa

Thirty-five years ago, on March 23, 1976, I brought a seventeen page letter to Citizenship officials here in Ottawa to ask about allowing some thirteen Low German Mennonite families from Mexico, who were then living in southern Ontario, to reclaim Canadian citizenship without having to first become “landed immigrants.”

I wrote the letter at the request of Rev. David Friesen from Aylmer, Ontario. He had helped quite a few Mennonites to obtain landed immigrant status, but the criteria for that, relating to education, job qualifications, knowledge of English, and other factors, had been tightened a lot. These families were not able to meet the new criteria so they were to be deported. But Immigration officials in London, Ontario, seeing that the people were of Canadian background, had urged David to explore possibilities under Canada’s citizenship law. With that in mind, David called me at the new MCC Ottawa Office.

Citizenship officials in Ottawa took their time, but they became sympathetic. In an August 24, 1976 letter, Mr. R. W. Nichols, then Registrar of Canadian Citizenship, wrote, “As a result of your letter of March 23, requesting special Ministerial consideration for a group of Mennonite families from Mexico, who are now back in Canada without status, we have undertaken an extensive research program. We have been contacted by the Department of Manpower and Immigration as well as External Affairs. Both of these offices seem to be giving serious consideration to the unique situation resulting from the exodus of Canadian Mennonites to Mexico. For this reason, I would ask you... to bear with us a little longer in an attempt to find a truly satisfactory solution to this difficult situation.”

What emerged early in 1977 was a new policy allowing “delayed registration” of citizenship. The citizenship law, passed in 1947, stated that children born outside of Canada, under that law, could be “registered” as Canadian citizens if (i) they were born of a Canadian father and in wedlock, or (ii) failing that, then of a Canadian mother and out of wedlock. The registration was to be done before the child’s second birthday, “or within such extended period as the Minister may authorize” (i) they were born of a Canadian father and in wedlock, or, (ii) failing that, (iii) then of a Canadian mother and out of wedlock. The registration was to be done before the child’s second birthday, or “within such extended period as the Minister may authorize in special cases.” A few Mennonites in Mexico had registered their children before their second birthdays, but most had not. Now the government would let those who otherwise qualified, to register regardless of how old they were.

When the government first opened this “door”, (together with one for people born in wedlock of a Canadian mother) it did so only for a two year period, and only if the people indicated in writing that they intended to live in Canada. Still, this door was very significant. I then informed workers in southern Ontario and elsewhere about how to help people make the appropriate applications. Also, in a May 1977 trip to Mexico, I met with Rev. Heinrich Dyck, the Aeltester in the largest colony near Cuauhtemoc. I said that we did not want...
to encourage people to return to Canada, that we wanted to respect the desire of the churches to keep their people there; but that we also felt that some were returning anyway, often for reasons of poverty. It was better for them, and for Canadian society, if they could live in Canada with secure legal status. After the first two years of this “door,” the government agreed on another two years; it did so again and again and again, until 2004. The requirement that people declare an intention to live in Canada was soon dropped, even though we did not ask for that. Before long more workers, in more places, were helping people with applications for citizenship. I did little of that, but there continued to be issues that required long submissions in Ottawa.

One issue for which we never found a good solution stemmed from the fact that Mexico recognizes only civil marriages, not church marriages. Since most Mennonites there, from the time of their arrival in the early 1920s to the late-1930s, had only church marriages, many children were technically born out of wedlock. The effect was that quite a few people were ineligible for Canadian citizenship. Another difficult issue related to the “retention” requirement. The 1977 law stated that certain people born outside of Canada, though eligible for Canadian citizenship, had to go through a retention process before turning 28. Unfortunately, the government did a very poor job of explaining which people were in this category. As a result quite a few ceased to be citizens when they turned 28, even if they had been living in Canada for many years. Getting the citizenship of such people re-instituted continues to be an arduous process.

Another issue is that in 2009 the government changed the citizenship law so that now people born outside of Canada can claim Canadian citizenship only if one of their parents was born in Canada. This greatly reduces the number of these Mennonites in Latin America who can obtain Canadian citizenship. Meanwhile the criteria for obtaining landed immigrant status have been tightened further. As a result, the flow back to Canada in the years ahead will probably be considerably smaller.

Still, this has been a significant chapter. The total number of those who’ve come to Canada over the years due to these “doors,” together with the children they’ve had here, could well be 60,000. Most have settled in Ontario, Manitoba and Alberta. Not all the effects are positive, either here or in the communities they left, but most of them say that here they are better able to provide for their families. Some keep sending money back to family members in Latin America.

When I reflect on this chapter, I’m grateful for the support from MCC, for the friendship of “documentation workers” throughout the hemisphere, for the sense of partnership with some government officials, for the privilege of having had a hand in matters that meant so much to the people affected, for the support of Marlene, my wife, and for God’s sustaining grace.

March 23, 2011

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Diphtheria epidemics of the 1880s
in the Mennonite West Reserve in Manitoba

Glen R. Klassen and Conrad Stoesz, Winnipeg

On February 15, 1885, Jacob Kroeker, Jr., a 27 year old farmer in the Mennonite village of Schoenwiese, halfway between Gretna and Morden on the Post Road, sent a village report to the Mennonitische Rundschau, which was published on March 4.

Worthy Editor! I read repeatedly in the Rundschau that you need to beg for reports and as there is so little of interest available to be read about the Reserve west of Emerson, I am driven to take up my pen to share a few things. First, I have to report that diphtheria is taking its relentless toll among the children and even at times among the older ones. In the month of December ‘84, two of my brothers, David and Abraham, age 12 and 7 respectively, who were living with our parents in Reiland, died of the disease. In January of this year the illness came to our village (Schoenwiese); it first entered the home of Peter Zacharias, where two of the children got the disease and one, Franz, died. Then it moved to Uncle Aaron Zacharias’ place where three fell ill, and one, Franz, died, while the others recovered. From there it crossed the street to the neighbors, Heinrich Ensz’s. There four got sick and two of them, Katharina and Peter, were taken into eternity. Then it moved to the Widow David Reimer’s place where two got sick and one of them, Maria, followed her father into eternity. Finally, the sickness entered the home of the Jakob Guenthers with great severity, confining the children to their beds. The two sick children were female twins, 2 years, 10 months old, one of them living four days longer than the other one. Both preceded their parents into heaven. Thus one after another of us leaves our circle and is no longer among the living.

Jacob was the father of a one year old toddler (Jacob), and was likely very worried about the encroaching threat of diphtheria. This disease, the dreaded Halskrankheit, had been epidemic throughout the Mennonite West Reserve since February of 1881, claiming many young lives, but had not affected the residents of Schoenwiese until the Peter Zacharias children got sick in January of 1885. Schoenwiese was the largest village in the West Reserve and was only two miles from Reiland, the administrative center, so it is remarkable that it remained free of diphtheria until 1885. Once it struck, however, it sickened 13 children and killed 7 of them within a month. The dead ranged in age from 2 to 11 and belonged to five families. None of the homes that were affected escaped without a death. There were about 74 children in the village in this age range, so the incidence of diphtheria among them was about 17 percent, and the fatality rate was 34 percent with most of the dead being preschool children (5 out of 7). These statistics are typical of epidemics of untreated diphtheria all over the world at that time and into the 20th century. We will
never know how the Zacharias children were infected, but Kroeker himself tells us that two of his brothers in Reinland succumbed to the disease in December of 1884. The Zacharias children in Schoenwiese were the first cousins of the Kroeker children in Reinland, so it is possible that that was the source.6 There had also been one diphtheria death reported in Reinland in 1883 (Agatha Harms, 2 months).7

Six or seven years after arriving in Manitoba as immigrants, the Mennonites faced their first major health challenge: the sickness and death of hundreds of young children due to diphtheria. All of the Mennonite communities and neighboring areas were affected, as was the City of Winnipeg and indeed the whole world. In 1883 and 1884, diphtheria was the leading cause of death in Winnipeg: more than 10 percent of all deaths were due to this scourge. Typhoid fever and respiratory diseases such as tuberculosis and pneumonia, which usually took the greatest annual toll, were eclipsed in those years by diphtheria.8

The Mennonite settlements (West Reserve, East Reserve, and Scratching River) were especially hard hit. Their death rates from diphtheria, as we shall see, far exceeded those in Winnipeg. The epidemic in the Mennonite East Reserve has been noted in a number of studies, with reports of about 70 deaths in 1884. (This represented about 70 percent of all deaths in the rural municipalities of Hanover and Hespeler that year!)9) There were also horrific stories of multiple deaths of children in the same families. Here we will tell the story of what happened in the West Reserve, where the epidemic was a severe and protracted ordeal extending throughout most of the 1880s. This study is made possible by the existence of very high-grade vital statistical documents created by the Reinlaender Gebietsamt for 1881-1883.

The village mayors were responsible for keeping records, including vital statistics. Directives from Mueller’s office dealt with a wide range of topics from announcements regarding lost and found items and auction sales to directing the community in building churches, school, and roads, the repayment of debts, and the collection of vital statistics. In late 1876, a little more than a year after arrival in Manitoba, Mueller requested the village books containing vital statistics from the mayors be brought to him.10

In 1880 the Manitoba provincial government amended the 1873 Municipal Act and drew up new municipal boundaries and asked residents to elect their representatives.11 The Rural Municipality of Rhineland included essentially the Mennonite portion of the West Reserve.12 For the Reinlaender Mennonite church this threatened to usurp the power of the Gebietsamt and the influence of the church. Some church members reportedly threatened to emigrate if this was forced upon them.13 Premier John Norquay and immigration agent and special friend to the Mennonites, William Hespeler, traveled to the West Reserve and met with church and civic leaders. Mennonites accepted an offer that allowed them to nominate Mueller as warden along with six other officials.14 With this new title came new responsibilities such as the reporting of more frequent and detailed census data. This revealed that Rhineland had the largest population of any municipality in the province at that time.15 The register of vital statistics for 1881-1883 was recorded under the direction of Mueller who also acted as Warden of the Rural Municipality of Rhineland. In Mueller’s circular of June 10, 1882 he reminded the village mayors to record detailed census information for the government including births, deaths, marriages and witnesses:

The Reinlaender Gebietsamt Register of Births, Baptisms, Marriages, and Deaths, 1881-1883

When Mennonites from the Chortitza and Fuerstenland colonies in Russia arrived in Manitoba in 1875 on the west side of the Red River, they organized themselves into the Reinlaender Mennonite Church, so-named because the Aeltester (bishop) settled in the village of Reinland. They settled on the western portion of the West Reserve in street villages as they had done in Russia. A village mayor or Dorfschulze was elected by the people and then these officials elected the reeve or Obervorsteher for the area. Isaak Mueller was elected in 1875 and skilfully served until his retirement in 1886. He, together with treasurer Franz Froese and secretary Peter Wiens, constituted the Reinlaender Gebietsamt (office overseeing municipal civic affairs) and worked in harmony with the church leadership.16

Notice from the district office of Reinland:
1. That all births, deaths, and marriages which occurred between 19 December 1881 and 20 June 1882 should be registered.
2. Register the person who assisted in the birth. And the person present at the death and what the cause of death was and who the church official was who officiated at the marriage and register one family present at the engagement of the couple and two families present at the marriage. These should be submitted to the district office by 24 June.
3. Jacob Dyck from Neuendorf should publish the coming marriages.
4. Peter Fehr from Grünthal should be notified during the year about any changes to the register.

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5. The villages which have not maintained the roads should do so upon receipt of this notice so that the machinery can be used elsewhere.

On 10 June 1882
Isak Müller
District Official

Church records usually do not include information about the cause of death. Thanks to Mueller, who kept a copy of the statistics requested by the government, we now have a unique dataset which includes the cause of death, crucial for any epidemiological analysis. Mueller remained Warden until 1884 when the Municipality and the Gebietsamt chose separate slates of officials and then in late 1883, boundaries changed. Rheinland Municipality was divided into a western portion, named Rheinland, and an eastern portion, known as Douglas. Jarvis Mott became the new Warden for Rheinland and was responsible for submitting vital statistics to the province. Mueller and the Gebietsamt continued working independently, forbidding its members from having anything to do with the municipality. The Gebietsamt continued issuing directives and collecting information as they had done in the past.

This resulted in the Gebietsamt register used in this study. It was preserved by church leadership in Manitoba for 40 years and then taken to Mexico in 1922. In 1992 Bruce Wiebe located this document in a large collection of materials in a trunk in the workshop belonging to former Vorsteher, Jacob Froese of Gnadenfeld, Manitoba Colony. With the permission of Froese and Vorsteher Heinrich Dyck, and Bishops Jacob Loewen and Franz Bannman, Wiebe was allowed to borrow selected items dating 1875-1922 for microfilming in Manitoba. This was done at the Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies in 1993.

An analysis of these remarkable records gives us a very fine-grained picture of the prevalence of serious health threats to the people of the West Reserve in the 1880s, and documents the onset of a major diphtheria epidemic and its spread throughout the colony during its first wave. Worse was to come in the second wave in the late 1880s, but detailed data on that is not yet available. It should be noted that in addition to the Reinaender village statistics, the registers also contain separate sections for all of the Berghalter villages in the West Reserve. The geographical separation between Reinaender and Berthalter villages is plotted in Figure 2. In the early 1880s the total population of the Reinaender Gebietsamt was about 6,100, consisting of about 3,600 Reinaender and “at least” 2,500 Berghalter. These totals will be used in this study, although, the total rose during the 1880s and the Berghalter count is tentative.

Death rates in the 1880s

To get a good perspective on the 1881-1883 data it should be placed into the context of the whole decade. Figure 1 shows the number of deaths per year for Rhineland and Douglas municipalities as recorded at Manitoba Vital Statistics, as well as deaths recorded in the RG register.

The graph clearly shows the two successive waves of high death rates. The number of deaths recorded at Manitoba Vital Stats for 1881 is obviously far too low in view of the 108 deaths reported for 1881 by the RG register. The reason for this can be inferred from Mueller’s directive (above): the official collection of data began as of Dec. 19, 1881. Apparently only the deaths after this date were submitted to the province. This accounts for the fact that only 6 deaths from 1881 can be found at Manitoba Vital Stats. The differences between Manitoba Vital Stats and the Reinaender Gebietsamt for the other years indicate that both data sets are incomplete. For example, for 1882, Vital Stats has 29 names which do not appear in the RG data while the RG register has 10 names that do not appear in Vital Stats. All of these are Mennonite names. Nevertheless, both data sets show a very rapid escalation of the death rate from 1881 to 1883. Further, Manitoba Vital Stats shows an even more dramatic rise from 1886 to 1888, the second wave of the epidemic. The abrupt end of the RG register at the end of 1883 may reflect the municipal changes outlined above.

How bad were the death rates in the Mennonite West Reserve in those years? In 1884 and 1885, during the lull between the two waves of the epidemic, there were 123 and 125 deaths respectively. This represents an annual death rate of about 20/1000, if we take the population to be 6,100. In the same year the death rate in Winnipeg was 18.8/1000. The Medical Health Officer said that this was “tolerably satisfactory” even though about 12 percent of the deaths were still due to diphtheria, the leading cause of death. This was considered to be “not epidemic” because the cases were localized in the western part of the city. Thus, West Reserve death rates between waves of the epidemic were comparable to those in Winnipeg at that time. As we have seen with respect to Schoenwiese, the West Reserve epidemic could also be localized, skipping some villages for long periods of time.

But the death rates at the peaks of the waves of illness and death in the West Reserve were much higher. In 1883 the rate was 34/1000 and in 1887 it was about 40/1000. This is far higher than anything seen in Winnipeg for those years. For the last six months of 1883, when provincial statistics were first done properly, the overall death rate was 22.64/1000 and in 1887 it was 24.55/1000. Diphtheria was taking a much higher toll in the Mennonite villages than in the city. While it is statistically suspect to compare a large population with a small one, the difference is so large that an explanation is needed. The East Reserve also experienced both waves of the
epidemic with the peak death rates of 43.6/1000 (1884) and 18.8/1000 (1887). However, the East Reserve had far fewer deaths overall because the first wave lasted for only two years and the second was barely detectable.

Why were the death rates so much higher in the Mennonite villages than in Winnipeg? Most likely it was the highly networked community of close relatives living close together. Fairly intimate contact on a weekly or even on a daily basis greatly increased the possibility of epidemic spread. Large families were especially vulnerable to diphtheria: multiple deaths within the same family were extremely common. Census data shows that Mennonites had relatively large families: even larger than those of the French Canadians, and much larger than those of Anglo-Saxons. Fatality rates among Mennonites (how many died compared to how many got sick) were not higher than normal, indicating that genetic factors were not likely to be playing a role in the high death rates. If a Mennonite got sick she had the same chance of dying as everyone else; it’s just that more Mennonites got sick.

The 1880s epidemic in historical perspective

Was the epidemic of the 1880s a new experience for the Mennonites? In research that will be published elsewhere, we have detected episodes of intra-family contagion occurring regularly in the Russian colonies. These included outbreaks of cholera, typhoid, typhus, diphtheria, measles, whooping cough, and scarlet fever. Some of these epidemics are noted in contemporary diaries, but we do not generally know how widespread or serious they were. It seems that Mennonites were reasonably healthy just before immigration, but suffered a lot of contagious disease as a result of immigration stress in 1874 and 1875. Once the settlers resumed normal village life health problems abated until they faced the diphtheria crisis of the 1880s.

Distinguishing between different reported throat conditions

The accuracy of reports depended on the knowledge of informants. Information for the register was collected by the village representative (Dorfs Vorstand in the RG register), invariably male, and reported to Peter Wiens, the Gebietsamt secretary, who presumably entered the data into the register just as he got them. There is no indication that he tried to standardize the terminology, or even the spelling of names, including those of the villages themselves. The changes in spelling of village names, e.g. (Edenburg/Edinburg; Krohnsthal/Kronsthale), may indicate that more than one person was involved in the writing of the register. This is also supported by obvious changes in handwriting over the course of three years. The village representative nearly always was a different man from each village, and in almost all cases there were at least two over the course of the three years. Thus, a great number of ordinary farmers were in charge of deciding the cause of death. In 1883 one man could report for more than one village, especially in the Bergthaler villages, so a certain amount of expertise may have been recognized in certain village representatives. Doubtless the process of determining the cause of death was done by consensus of a number of villagers, perhaps guided by the midwives and healers.

Some of the reporters show personal idiosyncrasies in their diagnoses. Johann Hooge in Hoffnungsfeld, for example, reports six cases of death from Halsbraeune spread out over 1882, during the worst of the diphtheria epidemic. But the disease name, which would be literally translated as “croup,” does not show up anywhere else in the WR. The diagnosis is also suspect because five of the children were of school age and so were more likely to die of diphtheria than of croup. Hooge is also atypical because he appears not to have been a Reinlaender, although Hoffnungsfeld was considered a Reinlaender village. Hooge may not have shared a common Reinlaender consensus regarding Halskrankheit. Thus we have treated five of the Hoffnungsfeld Halsbraeune deaths as cases of diphtheria. Because of lack of uniformity, and perhaps the lack of familiarity with diphtheria in the early stages of the epidemic, the causes listed in the register cannot be taken literally in all cases.

The most problematic aspect of the data regards the death of infants, here defined as three months or younger. Eighty-six such deaths are recorded in the register: 39 for 1881, 23 for 1882, and 24 for 1883, with an average age of 0.5 months. First of all, this shows that there was no elevation of the death rates for infants during the epidemic. In fact, the worst years (1882-1883) were better for infants than the best year (1881). This is because children up to about three months old retain immunity from their mothers, who, as adults, were usually immune to diphtheria. Only one adult death due to diphtheria is reported in the register (Peter Wiens, 68, Altona). It is also striking that in families experiencing multiple deaths from diphtheria within the family over a short time, the infants up to three months are usually spared.

Johann and Maria Hooge. Johann was the village representative (Dorfs Vorstand) for Hoffnungsfeld in 1881 and 82 and reported the deaths that occurred there in those years. Photo Credit: 1880 Village Census of the Mennonite West Reserve, 232.
But in the register, 12 infants are reported to have died from *Halskrankheit* and nine from diphtheria. In the *Halskrankheit* cases it is quite likely that the actual cause was croup, which, of course, can kill infants. Thus, the term *Halskrankheit* was probably used to cover diphtheria in young children and croup in infants. But the nine diphtheria verdicts are harder to explain. Two of them were infants, one of whom lived only one day and one lived 6 days. We don’t think they could possibly have developed enough symptoms for accurate diagnosis in that time, and anyway, they should have been protected by their mother’s immunity. Thus, even though we doubt the diagnosis in a relatively small number of the deaths, our analysis will use the data in the original. This may lead to a slight underestimation of the seriousness of the epidemic.

The average age at death of diphtheria victims was 4.0 years. The most common cause of death among adults in these years was typhoid (*Nervenfieber*). Twenty-two adults (average age 41.5 yrs) and nine minors (average age 5.2 yrs) died of this disease over the three years. Jacob Kroeker’s mother (Anna Zacharias Kroeker) died of typhoid in 1883.

The progress of the first wave of the epidemic (1881-83)

The data in Tables 1 & 2 show all deaths that were attributed to *Halskrankheit*, *Halsbraeune*, and diphtheria by the Reinlaender Gebietsamt for 1881-83. There were 294 such deaths reported in Reinlaender and Bergthaler villages. This represented 62% of all deaths in the RG register and 4.8 percent of the whole population of the Reserve. Ninety were attributed to diphtheria, 193 to *Halskrankheit*, and six to *Halsbraeune*. *Halskrankheit* and diphtheria were the same disease, but Reinlaender villages tended to report *Halskrankheit* while Bergthaler villages called it diphtheria, especially in the later stages of the epidemic. Strictly speaking, *Halsbraeune* refers to quinsy, which leads to a constriction in the throat called croup in young children. Diphtheria could be taken for croup by laymen, especially in the early stages of an outbreak, when there is little consciousness of diphtheria. In fact, the formal name for croup in German is *Kehlkopfdiphtherie* (laryngeal diphtheria).

Figure 2 shows the progress of the epidemic from 1881 to 1883. It appears that the disease spread outward from two centres and only in 1883 reached the villages on the outer fringe of the WR. The first death caused by diphtheria in 1881, that of one and a half year old Heinrich Funk in Schoenthal, occurred on February 7. Schoenthal was located in the centre of the Bergthal villages in the eastern part of the West Reserve. There may have been earlier cases in 1880, but these have not yet come to light. Over the spring and summer of 1881 seven more diphtheria deaths occurred in five Bergthaler villages surrounding Schoenthal (Edenburg, Hochstadt, Lichtfeld, Silberfeld, Schoenhof). None of the families involved experienced more than one death, but Edenburg had three deaths in different months. There was also one death in Hoffnungsfeld in February (Bernhard Giesbrecht, 7) which was recorded as due to *Halsbraeune*, but which could have been diphtheria. This is the only such death among the Reinlaender until October, so it is tempting to speculate that the disease entered

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Table 1. Diphtheria death statistics for Bergthaler villages according to the RG register. The population of individual villages is not known and was probably changing rapidly, so it is not possible to calculate the death rates. However, if there were about 2500 Bergthaler, the overall death rate due to diphtheria would be 48/1000.
Hoffnungsfeld by way of Bergthaler contacts. Anyway, this phase of the epidemic was not too alarming. Much worse was to come in Schanzenfeld, just south of Winkler. In October Bernhard Penner, 18 month old child of Peter and Anna Penner, died of *Halskrankeit*. Then in early November it struck the home of Minister Gerhard Paetkau, where Peter, Johann, and Margaretha, school-age children, died in quick succession. Then it moved to the Johann Schapanskis, where two pre-school children died, Helena in November and Cornelius in December. They lived next door to the Penners. Next, the Johann Krahns lost their nine year old son Peter, and the Jacob Knelsens, who lived next door to the Paetkaus, lost three young sons, Jacob, Abraham, and Joseph. In December the Jacob Martens lost their four year old Johann. They lived next door to the Krahns. So in less than two months, the village lost 11 children from six families. We don’t know how many were sick and survived. The outbreak in Schanzenfeld was very typical for diphtheria: contagion spreads very quickly within families with pre-school and school-age children and to their neighbors, but does not usually affect teen-agers, adults, or young infants. So 11 deaths were registered, 10 due to *Halskrankeit*, and one due to diphtheria. However, the *Rundschau* correspondent from Schanzenfeld, Bernhard Loewe, says that 12 children died of diphtheria during several months just before Christmas, 1881.36 This shows that Loewe took it for granted that *Halskrankeit* is the same as diphtheria and it may mean that the RG register sometimes missed a death. 37

How did the scourge reach Schanzenfeld in October of 1881? The death in near-by Hoffnungsfeld (Bernhard Giesbrecht) occurred in February, so it is unlikely that the disease was transmitted from there. Hoffnungsfeld people were in close contact with Bergthaler people in the east, so there may have been transmission from Schoenthal, which also experienced a February death (Heinrich Funk). After those horrible months in late 1881, Schanzenfeld would not experience any more diphtheria deaths for at least two years. Blumenhof, near the Bergthaler villages in the south east of the Reserve, was not so fortunate. The epidemic started early (November 1881) and persisted over the next two years with the deaths of 16 children.

In 1882 the disease spread to 12 more Reinlaender villages with the hardest hit being Hochfeld and Kronsthal, each with 12 deaths. Eight more Bergthaler villages were affected and the worst tolls were in Weidenfeld, Rosenfeld, and Edenburg, with 12, 7, and 6 deaths respectively. The worst case of multiple deaths in one family occurred in Weidenfeld, where the Martin Friesen family endured the deaths of five children, ages 2 to 13, within 10 days.38

The first six months of 1883 encompassed the worst of the epidemic. In the east, the disease came back to Schoenthal and Edenburg with a much greater toll than before, and spread to many other Bergthaler villages including Sommerfeld, where 12 children died. In the west, Burwalde and Neuhorst, the hardest hit, lost 15 and 10 children respectively. The deaths for Neuhorst were reported by *Obervorsteher* Isaak Mueller himself. In March of 1883, the worst month of the epidemic, there were 39 deaths in 16 villages throughout the Reserve.

Then abruptly in July of 1883, the epidemic virtually stopped. From July to November there were only nine diphtheria deaths for the whole colony. December saw a worrying increase to 12 deaths for the month, with a major third outbreak...
for Edenburg. It is possible that Edenburg suffered repeated outbreaks because it was an important meeting place and in fact a Bergthaler church was constructed there in 1883.39 In spite of this, we know from the Manitoba Vital Stats data that the second wave of the epidemic did not strike until 1885, so 1884 was not to be an epidemic year.

It should be remembered that the about half of the children who got sick with diphtheria survived, and recovered fully. For this reason it is perhaps wrong to trace the progress of an epidemic on the basis of deaths alone. A village may have had cases of diphtheria, but no deaths. This, however, is not very likely simply because of the virulence of the disease. As we have seen in the case of Schoenwiese in 1885, every home that had cases, also had at least one death.

What could they do?

The germ theory of disease had slowly emerged in the 1860s and 1870s in France and Germany. The idea may not have reached the Canadian frontier in time for the 1880s Mennonites to understand that diphtheria was caused by a germ. The offending germ was only identified and given a name in 1884, by the German microbiologist Friedrich Loeffler. This would explain why Mennonites did not fully appreciate the need for isolation of cases and quarantining of families. In their way of life it was almost inconceivable that people would be isolated from community life.

They understood, of course, that diphtheria was contagious and they did take care not to expose people who attended the funerals of diphtheria victims. But they were virtually helpless against the disease. As late as 1889 an “expert” writing in the Rundschaeu theorized that since the throats of victims had a grayish appearance, the cause must be the same fungus that caused mildew on grapes. And since this grape disease was treated by the application of sulfur, he recommended the same cure for diphtheria and other throat infections. Sulfur powder was mixed with water and the little patient was given a tablespoon of this every hour. Doubtless it caused the patient to cough violently and so dislodge some of the membranous clots in the throat, but it would have given only temporary relief. A less drastic treatment, also mentioned in this article, was to gargle with an extract of sage and lilac flowers mixed with honey and vinegar. External treatments consisted of applying very hot water and linseed oil plasters to the throat. Children were also encouraged to drink very hot sugared water at the first indication of a throat infection. All this would have done was to inflict mild burns on the infected area, greatly decreasing natural defenses. Doubtless there were many other home remedies, but none would have had any effect on the diphtheria toxin rapidly spreading throughout the victim’s bloodstream.

The advice given in the Rundschaeu also included warnings against crowded gatherings during epidemics and funerals. The concern seemed to be less about contagion than about the effects of hubbub on the patient, who should be encouraged to rest alone in bed. Visitors would only bring cold clothing into the sick room, causing relapse and even death for the patient.

Grieving and funerals for children

There were a number of cases where a young couple, with only one or two children, had to endure the loss of their whole family. Usually families were large, so that the effect of several deaths would still leave several other children, but the loss of a child would cause deep grief regardless. One can only imagine the horror of seeing one or two children get very sick and die, and to wonder if the rest would survive. The loss is well expressed by Helen Penner Hiebert, daughter of Erdman Penner:

After the incubation period had elapsed (They had had sick visitors from the West Reserve), nearly our whole family came down with diphtheria. Some were slightly ill, and three children, the pick of our family, died within two weeks. There was Margaret, a tall, slight girl with long fair braids, about two and a half years older than Erdman, and an extremely intelligent child, the brightest of us all; Abram, two years younger than I, a sturdy, red-cheeked little fellow, the apple of my father’s eye; and Sara, a perfect cherub of a little child, with lovely blue eyes. Mother’s only blue-eyed child and with a mass of golden curls. She was just beginning to talk and was everyone’s pet.

The climax of the funeral was the Minister’s Leichenrede fuer Kinder. One such sermon that has been preserved, was preached by East Reserve Aeltester David Stoesz at least 17 times from 1884 to 1900. There are many sad references such as “…that little pale body…” or “[it is] so painful for family members to watch when their child struggles so painfully in bed…” or “Let us approach this casket with its little body…” or “…we want to take this little body, after singing a beloved hymn, to its quiet place, the grave, where it is to rest until the end of days.” The main message, however, was that the child is much better off with Jesus and the angels: in fact the child has been rescued from the sorrows and temptations that we struggle with every day. The funeral is not a time to feel sorry for the child, but a time to consider our own spiritual state in view of our own impending deaths.

The sermon ends on a gloriously positive note:

O, then it will all be clear what we are not now able to see and we will call out in greater surprise than did the Queen from Arabia when she came to see Solomon’s riches and wisdom and saw much more than she had expected: “Not even the half has been told me!” And so we will also have to confess when we see our children with all the elect of God and with the holy angels flying around the throne of God, and will have to admit that in this life the half of such wonders have never entered our minds. And then seeing God Himself, face to face, we will wipe away all sorrow, all suffering and all tears from our eyes.

Could this be carried too far? Heinrich Harder, writing to the Rundschaeu from Bergfeld in 1884 ventures to say, “I believe that the loving God takes away these innocent children before the coming of a great calamity,” referring perhaps to the end times. The Rundschaeu editor takes him to task with a comment to the effect that he hopes that all public health regulations are being strictly followed, and expresses the suspicion that the authorities are being negligent. Is it possible that the Mennonites were also somewhat negligent, knowing that they were dealing with a contagious disease and not taking necessary precautions? Were they too willing to consign their little children to eternity? Did they reason that children, after all, are relatively easy to replace? We, who almost never...
experience the death of a child from infectious disease, should perhaps withhold judgment.

A modern perspective on diphtheria

Diphtheria antitoxin serum (immunoglobulin), a treatment for diphtheria, was developed in 1890 and was available to save the lives of children already sick with the disease. It was able to reduce the mortality due to diphtheria to 10 percent or less, which was still high, but much better than the 50 percent mortality rate for untreated diphtheria before the advent of antibiotics. The serum saved lives, but it did not prevent epidemics. Serum was available to the Mennonites in Manitoba by 1900, but was not always used in time.46 A brief summary of the microbiology and pathology of diphtheria was presented earlier.47

Diphtheria epidemics were a fact of life all over the world until the arrival of the diphtheria toxoid vaccine in 1926. It’s the “D” in DPT. This preparation is able to prevent diphtheria, and until the arrival of the diphtheria toxoid vaccine in 1926. It’s the mortality rate for untreated diphtheria before the advent of the diphtheria toxoid vaccine in 1926. It’s the mortality rate for untreated diphtheria before the advent of antibiotics. The serum saved lives, but it did not prevent epidemics. Serum was available to the Mennonites in Manitoba by 1900, but was not always used in time.46 A brief summary of the microbiology and pathology of diphtheria was presented earlier.47

The worst example is the massive diphtheria epidemic in the former Soviet Union in the 1990s, when 140,000 cases were reported, and 4,000 people died.48 The epidemic was blamed on the failure to immunize a large proportion of the population at the right time due to gross mismanagement of public health. In Haiti, after the earthquake, a 15 year old boy died of diphtheria, because they couldn’t find any serum in all of Port au Prince. This shows that diphtheria can re-emerge when vaccination is not universally adopted, or when chaotic situations occur.

Endnotes

1 According to the Reinhaender Gemeinde Buch he was born on Jan 5, 1858, but in the 1880 census his birthday is recorded as Jan 5, 1859 (Reinhaender Gemeinde Buch 26-3).
2 Translated by Glen Klassen.
3 Halskrankheit was diphtheria although it may also have covered other severe throat conditions such as croup. Halsbraune was reported in a few cases as a cause of death and may have referred more specifically to croup. As the epidemic progressed, the term Halskrankheit was replaced by “Diphtheria” in the records. Other throat conditions would not have been confused with diphtheria due to their distinctive signs. Streptococcal sore throat would have been referred to as Halsenzechung and scarlet fever was Scharlachfieber. The correct German term for croup was Keilhautdiphtherie, but this is not found in the Mennonite literature. Horses were also reported with Halskrankheit but this was not diphtheria.
4 This number was obtained by updating the 1880 census data by means of the 1885 Village Census of the Mennonite West Reserve. It does not take into account any immigration or emigration to or from the village between Jan 1, 1880 and Jan 1, 1885.
5 Manitoba Daily Free Press, July 9, 1900, 3.
6 A map of the village would have been nice here, but we have not been able to establish the location of lots 32-46. Lots 1-31 are shown on p. 122 of the Rural Municipality of Rhineland 1884-1984.
8 Ens, 76.
10 Ens, Church, Family and Village, 76.
11 Ens, 76.
12 Ens, 77.
13 Rosenort village papers MHC volume 1099 file 29, June 10, 1882, translation by Bert Friesen, 2011.
15 Email from Bruce Wiebe to author (Conrad Stoesz) August 25, 2011.
16 Not all the people in each Reinhaender village were part of the Reinhaender Church—some chose to associate with Berghalter people and their worship patterns.
17 Dyck and Harms, 6.
21 Perhaps it is now time to submit the deaths for 1881.
22 Names from both data bases could be merged to give a more accurate total, but unpublished graveyard studies show that there were deaths that were not recorded in either of the official data sets. This means that all historical studies involving death totals are using data that understates the actual number of deaths.
23 Manitoba Daily Free Press, Jan 13, 1885.
24 These figures should be slightly adjusted for population increase over the 1880s but for this study it was not considered necessary due to the highly significant differences between years.
25 The rate for the 6 months would have been half of this number.
26 The population of the East Reserve was taken to be 2,200, based on the 1891 Canada census with a 5% adjustment due to population growth. Non-epidemic annual death rates in the East Reserve were about 12/1000 while they were about 16/1000 in the West Reserve. This difference may just reflect a higher rate of death reporting in the West Reserve than in the East Reserve. This would make the 1884 spike of deaths in the East Reserve even more horrific.
27 Wiens’ name appears in a column for the first few pages of the register, but then that column is dropped. The handwriting seems to change, especially for 1883.
28 The spelling of village names is sometimes consistently different from that in modern references: e.g. Cortizt, Weidefeld, Blumenhoff.
29 In 1883 Abraham Wiebe reported for Sommerfeld, Silberfeld, and Gnadenfeld.
30 It was not likely to be scarlet fever, which also affects the throat, because of the characteristic rash. Scarlet fever was known as Scharlachfieber. It became epidemic in the Mennonite settlements in the 1890s.
31 The spelling of village names is sometimes consistently different from that in modern references: e.g. Cortizt, Weidefeld, Blumenhoff.
32 This number was obtained by updating the 1880 census data by means of the 1885 Village Census of the Mennonite West Reserve. It does not take into account any immigration or emigration to or from the village between Jan 1, 1880 and Jan 1, 1885.
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51 Manitoba Daily Free Press, July 9, 1900, 3.
52 A map of the village would have been nice here, but we have not been able to establish the location of lots 32-46. Lots 1-31 are shown on p. 122 of the Rural Municipality of Rhineland 1884-1984.
On October 22nd and 23rd, 2011 the Chair in Mennonite Studies at the University of Winnipeg and the Plett Foundation jointly hosted a conference whose specific theme was the so-called ‘Horse and Buggy’ Mennonites of Ontario, Manitoba, Mexico, Belize, Argentina, Paraguay and Bolivia. The conference brought together scholars from around the world that had spent some time among the most conservative of Mennonites. For two days conference presenters and an engaged audience of 130 to 175 people discussed a wide range of topics, all dealing with the life, culture, religion, and practices of Mennonites who in some way choose not to adopt many modern ways.

The stimulus for the conference was a multi-year research project by Dr. Royden Loewen, the Chair in Mennonite Studies at the University of Winnipeg. Loewen’s research was supported by the Canadian government’s Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and involved sending seven graduate students to visit Mennonite colonies, to live among the people and to learn about how they live. Along with these graduate students, other researchers from the Netherlands, Norway, Newfoundland, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario, and Manitoba also presented. The keynote speaker on Friday evening was Don Kraybill from Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania. Kraybill has written some twenty-seven books on the conservative Mennonites in the United States, focusing primarily on the Amish.

The conference was divided into sessions with each session focusing on a particular area. Friday morning began with Andy Martin’s presentation that pointed to the remarkable similarity between the rules of the Benedictine monks dating back to the sixth century and the Old Order Mennonites of Ontario. An interesting speaker in the Ontario session was Levi Fry, the only person attending the conference that actually drove a horse and buggy in daily life. Fry outlined the serious challenges faced by those wishing to live the Old Order life when it comes to interaction with governments. Increasingly information is only available on the Internet, forms are no longer available or are difficult to get in paper, and photo identification is almost a necessity.

The remaining Friday sessions focused on Mexico and Belize. Tina Fehr Kehler helped the audience understand how certain individuals among the Old Colony Mennonites of Campeche became negotiators and mediators between ‘the World’ and the Colony when it came to purchasing land. Arlette Kouwenhoven helped us look into the difficult decision the Fehr family of Sabinal, near Nuevo Casas Grandes faced, of whether to move, or whether to stay. Sabinal is the last Horse and Buggy Colony in northern Mexico. Kouwenhoven is from Amsterdam and has written a book chronicling the Fehr family’s migrations from their Anabaptist beginnings in the Netherlands to Sabinal.

The conference touched on difficult themes in the story of the Old Colony Mennonites of Latin America. Dutch researchers Anna Kok and Tanja Pasil told stories of how the rules are broken by Colony members, how painful the ban is for families, and how difficult separation is when members move out of the colony or join the more modern Kleine Gemeinde Church. Doreen Klassen’s oral history interviews with women focused on the memories of having to move and underlined the importance of women in the stories of migration. Martha Hiebert’s stories of a Bolivian midwife and health care provider and her busy days working to help the colony’s mothers, babies and the sick gave the audience a unique window into everyday Old Colony life. The audience fell silent when her story of recovered tenderness and love in the lives of a Bolivian couple was shattered by the horrible rapes that came to light in Bolivia in 2009.
In a session entitled “Encounters with Northerners”, Dick Braun from Osler, Saskatchewan, who described himself as someone coming from a long line of blacksmiths, told stories of remarkable innovation among Bolivian Mennonites in designing pumps, washing machines and other equipment. In other presentations the important economic benefit that Mennonites brought to the Belizean and Bolivian countryside was highlighted as well as the challenges of small scale agriculture in a modern world.

Other encounters with ‘Northerners’ were less complimentary. Jack Hoeppner’s presentation claimed that Old Colony Mennonites were not even Anabaptists when judged by Stuart Murray’s book, the *Naked Anabaptist*. Hoeppner’s criticisms were sharp and his approach to the conservative Mennonites of Bolivia illustrated effectively the challenge faced by conservative Mennonites when other Mennonites come to ‘help’ them.

A highlight of the conference was Don Kraybill’s keynote presentation on Friday evening. Kraybill is a professor at Elizabethtown College in Pennsylvania and has been an important interpreter of the Amish in the media in the United States. Kraybill is the author of *Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy*, a book that chronicled the remarkable spirit of forgiveness extended by the Amish community after the Nickel Mines shooting of Amish school children in 2006. Kraybill began by telling the story of a newcomer to North America who was perplexed by the sight of a man on a riding mower mowing his lawn. He could not understand. There seemed to be no harvesting going on—the grass was not being cut to be fed to animals—in fact nothing at all was done with it and there seemed to be no need or purpose to spending time and energy on cutting it. Kraybill extended the story to illustrate the tendency for ‘modern’ society to view the horse and buggy Mennonites in the same way. Their ways seem incomprehensible when viewed through the lens of someone who mows their lawn, wears a necktie, and showers in the morning, rather than in evening when it might actually be necessary. Kraybill then explored the condition of being modern with its emphasis on the individual, its preoccupation with technology, its insistence on choice. In contrast with the Old Orders, Kraybill also noted how technology demands our time and attention without thoughtful reflection on what its demands imply for our lives. Telephones demand to be answered, cars demand to be driven, emails must be addressed. The suggestion did not go unchallenged. Lorenzo Cañás Bottos, a presenter originally from Argentina, countered in the discussion.
following Kraybill’s talk, that objects cannot have a will, the problem is with those that use them.

The conference was an opportunity for the Plett Foundation Board of Directors to meet for their semi-annual Board meetings. At noon on Friday, the Board took the opportunity to learn from Donald Kraybill about how the Centre for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies, where he is the Senior Scholar, worked. He offered a number of suggestions for the Plett Foundation that will help in developing the Foundation into an important resource for Mennonite history.

As is the custom for Chair in Mennonite Studies’ Conferences, the academic presentations will be published in the 2013 issue of the Journal of Mennonite Studies, an academic journal published by the Chair. Some of the presentations may appear as articles in the next issue of Preservings.

Conference organizers, Royden Loewen and Hans Werner, received many favourable comments on the conference. Presentations were interesting and provoked deeper reflection about the history and life of those who reject, or in some cases struggle with adopting so much that the rest of us take for granted.

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The Horse and Buggy

A photo essay by Hans Werner and Conrad Stoesz, Winnipeg

The horse and buggy was the main transportation for Mennonites from the time of their arrival in the 1870s until the 1930s. The larger horse drawn wagon, or ‘double box’, moved larger loads, such as grain, from the field to the yard and then to market. The buggy was used to move people, to go to church, to go visiting on Sundays, for a quick ride to town, and for courting. The arrival of the automobile in the 1920s dealt a serious blow to the buggy although it would be some time before the horse and buggy would be replaced by the automobile. Many of the later automobile manufacturers had their beginnings as buggy makers. For instance, the Studebaker brothers were German Baptist wagon and carriage makers who began making automobiles in the early 1900s. Jacob Schantz travelled with a group of twenty-five Russian Mennonites who left for Manitoba in May 1875 up to South Bend, Indiana where he placed an order for Studebaker wagons that were to be delivered to Manitoba.1

For conservative Mennonites the introduction of the automobile was watershed where the ‘world’ had to be resisted and the horse and buggy became a mark of their distinctive separation from that world.

Endnotes

Up to the 1930s the horse was still the most common form of transportation in the area. There were many trails in the district and on a quiet morning or evening one could hear the echo of the clop-clop of hooves. People would be riding to the village store and anyone who owned a light team and buggy rode in style. Some had an open buggy pulled by one horse, while others bumped along the winding trails in bigger buggies pulled by two horses. Most buggies had a spring seat and, for additional comfort, they had a grain bag filled with feathers for padding. If more than two adults were riding a second seat was added. For convenience every town had hitching posts, a livery stable and blacksmith shop for those that came to town with horses.

On a nice Sunday morning the roads were dotted with buggies and wagons of every description—some drawn by old nags, others by horses whose gait and form showed good breeding that some people considered violated the orthodox concepts of humility. By the 1930s many buggies showed age and apparently no new ones were shipped in.


Johann Bergman and his wife of Reinland on a buggy pulled by two horses and with a spring seat. Photo Credit: Mennonite Heritage Centre, 224.14.
Buggies with rooftops were considered inappropriate for our members. At first it seemed that this position was accepted. Some members, who had already bought one, sold it again. They thought that in time it would not be permitted for members to set themselves on the same plane as the world with their fine buggies. However, while the bishop suggested from the pulpit that this trend should diminish, among the elites it began to flourish. With that, the issue seemed finished. The bishop appeared to be tired or had lost courage to continue to resist the trend. Gradually opposition to it grew silent and the Gemeinde was flooded with “top buggies” and anyone wishing to have one could do so.


Buggies, both with a top and without in front of the church in Mexico. Photo Credit: Walter Schmiedehaus as printed in Gäste und Fremdlinge, 45.

Horses and Buggies often gave rise to accusations of pridefulness. These photos from the West Reserve near Altona display the pride of ownership in fine horses, top buggies, and the fashions that troubled Peter A. Elias. Photo Credit: Mennonite Heritage Centre, 526.42.4 and 526.03.4

The larger two seat buggy, referred to as the Bronson wagon in American tradition. This one was purchased by Abram Rempel, Reinland in 1915. It has been preserved in the Ens Heritage Homestead in Reinland, Manitoba. Photo Credit: Henry G. Ens as printed in Old Colony Mennonites in Canada, 2011.
You could purchase your buggy from the Eaton’s catalogue and have it delivered to the nearest train station. This page is from the Eaton’s 1916 Spring and Summer Catalogue. Source: Library and Archives Canada.
[In] a visit with some Old Colony families [in Mexico] one Sunday evening...they stated that the marks of one lower on the ladder in the past had been one who could drive only a farm wagon for both Sunday and weekday use. Those who were more well-to-do had nice top buggies. Now it is much the same, only those who drive farm wagons made of modern cars on rubber are lower down, while those who drive buggies either on rubber or wood spokes are higher up. Source: Calvin Wall Redekop, Old Colony Mennonites: Dilemmas of Ethnic Minority Life (1969), 202.

A fancy top buggy with tufted upholstery and a blended vehicle, part automobile, part buggy. Photo Source: Gäste und Fremdlinge, 58.

Although undated, the photo of people leaving the Gnadenfeld church in Mexico captures the transition from the metal rimmed wooden spoked wheel to the rubber tired buggy. Both types appear in this photo. Photo credit: Gäste und Fremdlinge, 45.

‘Dee trocke no Peace River’:
Mennonites in La Crete, Alberta

Hans Werner, Winnipeg

As I write this in late September, the sun in Winnipeg is setting; it is 7:00 pm. The days are getting shorter, but in La Crete, Alberta the even longer days of summer are quickly giving way to the brutally short days of winter. By December 22nd the sun will rise at 9:00 am and set at 3:45 pm., making for over an hour less daylight than we have in the already short days of a Winnipeg winter. The La Crete-Fort Vermilion area, often referred to simply as Peace River, represents the most northerly edge of the spread of Russian Mennonite agricultural settlement. Situated on the 58th parallel, La Crete is about four degrees of latitude, or 370 kilometers north of where Mennonites established agricultural villages along the Trans Siberian Railway near Omsk in Siberia in the late 1890s.

La Crete is an amazing phenomenon. My wife Diana and I left Edmonton in a rented car to take Highway 88 to La Crete in late May 2011. When I confessed what we had done, the locals shook their head and said: “In that car?” We had rented a compact car, not realizing that the road was not surfaced after Red Earth. But we were fortunate; the road was quite passable with only a short section requiring slower speeds. The vastness of the boreal forest is impressive, but there are few distractions. Seeing a grizzly bear on the side of the road was one highlight that broke up the hours and hours of forest. Red Earth is a place on a map, but it betrays all the signs of a temporary resource town. Seemingly a place with just hotels that are really modular mobile homes, Red Earth did not look like a place where you brought your family, put down roots, made memories, and recorded history. Emerging upon the agricultural landscape in Peace River country many hours later is surprising and you cannot help but be impressed with seeing homes, farms, fields, schools and churches. Familiar names are next, Blumenort and Reinland Park.

La Crete owes its name to the Rivard brothers, Ettiene, Conrad, and Anistoch who left Quebec in 1917 to escape
Conscription. Conscription in World War I was controversial and while British Canadians flocked to join up in the early days of the war, when mounting losses brought conscription, it was most unpopular in Quebec. The Rivard brothers hid at a landing on the shores of the Peace River, which they named La Crete, French for a rooster’s comb, which the landscape brought to mind.¹

The story of Mennonites settling at La Crete is usually prefaced by the story of three Mennonite families who left Hague, Saskatchewan for Northern Alberta in the fall of 1932. They hired John Peters and his Model T truck to take them from as far as Peace River, Alberta where the roads ended. The Jacob Unrau, Isaac Hiebert, and Isaac Wieler families then built a scow to travel down the Peace River to their new home at Carcajou. The unpredictable Peace River and the lack of land prompted a further move in 1936 to the La Crete area approximately 70 kilometers downstream. The original settlers from Carcajou that moved to La Crete were soon inundated with large numbers coming from Saskatchewan to escape the Depression, and from Mexico where the Mexican government had threatened to close Mennonite schools. The Old Colony presence in La Crete dominated church life. Isaac Wieler, one of the first settlers at Carcajou served as minister and Bishop Johann Loeppky travelled from Saskatchewan in 1936 or 1937 to conduct baptism and communion.² In 1940 Wilhelm P. Wiebe was elected to be minister and just over a year later he was ordained as first Ältester in the district. Wiebe would serve the Old Colony Mennonites of the area for 36 years, until his passing in 1977.³

Until the early 1940s almost a hundred percent of the 450 people that lived in the La Crete area were Old Colony Mennonites. Then in the 1950s roads were built, the riverboat service came to an end, trucks came into use, and the provincial government brought in public schools. Other Mennonites began to move in. The Saskatchewan Bergthaler presence came in the 1950s, and a split in 1965 resulted in the Sommerfelder Church. In the 1970s the EMC established a presence in the community and in the 1980s the Peace Mennonite church was established by Swiss Mennonite mission efforts.⁴

As early as the 1960s, the increasing pressures of modernization and the arrival of Mennonite groups that embraced various modern technologies and public education stimulated migrations that have been a lasting legacy for the La Crete area. Dawn Bowen suggests that “between 1959 and 1970, about half of the people who had been living in the La Crete area in 1958 moved away.”⁵ Smaller migrations to Worsley, southwest of La Crete and Belize were followed by larger migrations to Bolivia that established the Las Piedras Colony. Not all were happy with their new life in Bolivia and La Crete has seen migration back and forth to Bolivia, often at the same time.

Although people left La Crete in large numbers, farming in Peace River country continued to attract settlers. The La Crete area is blessed with rich soil and a growing season that
is surprising, considering how far north it is. The lower elevation of the Peace River valley extends the minimum frost free period required for agriculture of 80 days all the way up to the La Crete area. Most years the frost free period exceeds 100 days and with the 18.5 hours of sunshine on June 21st, the number of growing days is adequate to grow Canola, barley and wheat. Settlement has also been stimulated by the availability of land. Some of the people we visited in La Crete were from southern Manitoba and had grown up as neighbors of my wife, Diana. They moved to Peace River country in the 1960s when land was available and you could start something new; it was to some extent an adventure. Agricultural settlement was stimulated by the government making new land available for homesteading. One of the increases in homestead land occurred between 1980 and 1984 when the Blue Hills area southwest of La Crete was made available for farming. By 2006 the area sported a population of just over 1000, “virtually all of the Mennonite faith,” as one study put it. When travelling the rural areas around La Crete one is struck by the large scale production of small grains, and the prosperous farms and homes that dot the landscape.

Along with new land becoming available, people in La Crete increasingly exploited other economic opportunities. Almost everyone we visited in La Crete had stories to tell of working on the Mackenzie Highway, or the railway when it was extended to High Level in the late 1960s. Most common was the experience of working in the bush in winter. Today La Crete’s economy is based on both agriculture and forestry. The area boosts a number of sawmills and logging and trucking are important industries that provide employment for many Mennonites.

The town of La Crete has grown dramatically. Officially designated by the provincial government as a hamlet in 1979, La Crete has become the service centre for the entire Mennonite settlement area. The town has a distinctly Mennonite identity and ‘feel’ to it. It seems like everyone eats out at the Country Grill, the parking lot is filled with pickup trucks, Low German emanates from most of the tables, and hardly anyone passes by a table without a greeting or a short conversation. The Chamber of Commerce points to ‘Moonlight Madness’ sale days before Christmas as a highlight, and families are large and important in community and church relations. La Crete boasts that one-half its population is less than 25 years of age. Traffic is heavy on Sunday mornings when the community goes to church, although one person thought there were still not enough churches, because it seemed not everyone was seemingly able to attend.

We attended the Old Colony Church in La Crete on Sunday morning. The worship service was similar to such services in Mexico and other Old Colony centers. The hat hooks were missing, other than in the front rows for those who had difficulties getting around. The minister used the ‘au’ common among conservative Mennonites and the singing was ‘lange wiese’. Our visit in early May coincided with the beginnings of preparation for baptism. The younger minister who spoke,
challenged the congregation to reflect on baptism as more than a ritual, but rather a sign of a life of commitment to the faith.

Certainly La Crete still conveys a sense of its conservative Mennonite origins and history. A sure sign that the pioneer era is now in the past is the creation of a museum with an attractive multi-use building and an interesting collection of heritage buildings and artifacts. But not surprisingly, the pull of being more evangelical, bigger, more modern is strong. The museum’s promotional brochure notes that in addition to the Old Colony, Sommerfelder and Berghalder Churches there are now two E.M.C. churches, the Peace Mennonite Church, the Believer’s Fellowship, Living Hope, and Charity Church in the community.9

We had a wonderful time in La Crete. We visited with the Wielers, Diana’s childhood neighbors, enjoyed conversations with many people, and were helped immensely by the contacts arranged for us by Peter Letkeman. La Crete is a remarkable Mennonite place on the edge of the agricultural world.

Endnotes
2 Ibid, 24, 36, 88.
3 Ibid, 89.
5 Bowen, 62.
8 According to one study the number was 54.4 percent. See “A Statistical Review...”, 12.

Mennonite Heritage Tour to Poland

Al Hamm, Steinbach

It was a beautiful sunny morning June 11, 2010 when our plane left Frankfurt and headed for Warsaw. As we approached our destination, I saw the landscape of Poland in lush green fields of crops and countryside. I also noticed rivers and streams, and remembered that southern Poland had received a lot of rain about two weeks earlier. In mounting excitement I wondered which of these rivers was the Vistula, and were we flying over the “Weichsel Niederung” that my grandfather had mentioned in his life story. I had come to Poland to learn more about our Mennonite heritage in this part of Europe, and more specifically to visit the areas that my grandfather wrote about. Our tour had been organized by Alan Peters of the California Mennonite Historical Society, and was to begin the next day.

As arranged, I met some other members of our tour group at the Warsaw airport, and together we took a new, modern bus to the Novotel Centrum Hotel. This up-to-date hotel is in the centre of the city, near the train station and also near the Palace of Culture and Science. Since our tour did not officially begin until next day, each of us was on our own, so for supper I went across the street to KFC. American chain restaurants are numerous in Poland. Going across the street meant entering an underground walkway which included many small shops and retail outlets. I was immediately impressed with the cleanliness of the streets and the city itself, as well as the friendliness of the people.

The next day, Saturday, our group met in the lobby of the hotel and we were introduced to each other. Our tour began with a visit to Lasienski Park with its monument to Chopin, the rebuilt historic Old Town (Warsaw was 85 percent destroyed by the Nazis in 1944) and the 1943 Warsaw Uprising monument. The tour included, as it did each day, walking through market squares as well as large cathedrals.

On day two we left our hotel for a drive through the picturesque countryside along the Vistula River. We had our first view of large dikes, similar to the ones our Mennonite ancestors built to drain the swampy regions to convert into lands that were fertile and productive. Enroute we visited villages and cemeteries in the Wymysle region, and arrived late afternoon in Thorn (Torun), birth place of Copernicus, noted astronomer of the 15th century, and site of a large Mennonite church for hundreds of years.

On day three, we continued to Danzig (Gdansk), with stops that were of interest; Schoensee (Sośnowka), Schoeneich

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(Szymych), Niedergruppe (Dolna Grupa), Gross Lubin (Wlk. Lubien), Montau (Matawy), Sprind (Zdrojewo), Weide (Pastwiske), and Sandberg (Piaski). The last three were of particular interest to me because my grandfather, Bruno Hamm, was born in Sprind, his father was born in Weide, and his mother was born in Sandberg. All three villages are near Neuenberg (Nowe). Other stops this day included Stuhm (Sztum), Montauweide (Montowo), and the Tragheimerweide cemetery.

On day four, we toured Danzig (Gdansk) including the Danzig Mennonite Church, Solidarity monument, St. Mary’s Church, Golden Gate and Long Market. Like Warsaw, Danzig was 85 percent destroyed by the Russians in early 1945, but the city centre is now totally rebuilt to its former self. We took a drive to Elbing (Eblag). Here we met a Mr. Stein, scholar and historian, who is working on restoring a 1902 building for a Mennonite museum and is involved in promoting Mennonite history. In Tiegenhof (Nowy Dwor) a 150 year old Mennonite house has been restored, and nearby a lapidarium has been established, which holds numerous Mennonite gravestones salvaged from 11 different cemeteries. All Mennonite cemeteries in former Prussia have long ago been abandoned and neglected. Grave stones have been stolen, stones and markers that remain have been broken and vandalized, some graves have fallen in or collapsed, weeds, tall grass, large brush and huge trees cover the entire cemeteries to the extent that from a distance they look like a forest, or uninhabited areas.

On day five we visited the Marienburg (Malbork) Castle, a great fortress of the Teutonic Knights, and stopped in at various Mennonite villages. The Heuboden (Stogi) cemetery is huge, and is presently being cleaned up by local people and includes grave stones that have on them names like Classen, Harder, Entz, Penner, and Neufeld. My excitement rose when in the Ladekopp (Lubieszewo) cemetery I discovered some grave stones with the name Hamm on them. We found the Rosenort (Rozewo) cemetery nestled in the beautiful area of yellow canola fields, along well-kept roads lined with big mature trees. Rosenort is significant because the old church records of this congregation were destroyed in a flood 150 years ago. It is also from here that the first wagon train of people left in 1788 for South Russia.

The next day included more visits and stops at Mennonite villages and cemeteries in the Gross Werder region. Our tour...
leader Alan Peters, being a genealogist himself, was very organized and helpful in this heritage tour. Whenever we entered a village, he called out the names of people who had ancestors from that place, and provided ongoing commentary about Mennonite history in Poland/Prussia.

The last day (day seven) we drove to the Baltic Sea at Stegna, and took in a tour of the Stutthof concentration camp. We were told that of the sixteen million people who died in concentration camps during World War II, 66,000 died at Stutthof. We concluded our heritage tour with a farewell dinner Friday night, and had to say our goodbyes to new friends that we had come to know and appreciate.

As I indicated in my first paragraph, I had another reason to go to Poland, and that was to follow up on a very interesting story concerning my grandfather Bruno Hamm. He came from a long line of Mennonite people who did not join the emigrations to South Russia. In 1911 he came to Canada from Prussia as a young man and got a job as miller in Grunthal, Manitoba. Shortly after, he got married, bought a farm and raised a family.

Over the years, he tried to convince his parents to move to Canada as well, but, instead they bought a large apartment house and business block in the town of Drossen (now Osno Lubuskie), which is approximately 120 kilometers east of Berlin in present-day Poland. We are in possession of letters that were written from Germany to our grandfather here in Canada, which is evidence of continued communication between them.

By 1939 his parents were aging and not in good health, so he decided to visit them. No sooner had he arrived in Drossen in September 1939, when the war broke out. He was taken to a concentration camp, and a few months later transferred to a forced labour project working in the Kaiser Electric Motor factory in Drossen.

By 1944, when the Soviets began to occupy this region, there were only about 16,000 Mennonites in all of Poland. Most of them had fled before the occupation and those who had not were either forced to leave for what was left of Germany, or lost their lives. In the first few days of February 1945 the Russians arrived and took the village of Drossen without a struggle. My grandfather was able to flee; however, he could not convince his parents to go with him. They both died on February 10, 1945 from the abuse they received from the Russians. In a long and difficult journey, well documented, grandfather finally made his way to Canada, and I still remember that day in April 1946 when our parents picked him up at the CNR station in Winnipeg.

On Saturday, June 19, 2010 I took the train from Warsaw to Berlin. As previously arranged, I was met at the railway station by Friedhelm Janzen, a young Mennonite man living in Berlin. After doing some sight-seeing in Berlin, we went to the Mennonheim for night, and next morning drove out to Drossen. I discovered that the property which my great-grandparents had owned, and all the buildings on both sides of the street, had been burned by the Russians. We visited the cemeteries. However, like all the other Mennonite and Lutheran cemeteries in Poland, these were in abandoned condition, and we were unable to find any trace of my great-grandparents’ grave sites.

I arrived home on Monday June 21, 2010, having experienced a trip I had dreamed about for years. I will not easily forget the people I met, the new friends I made, and a part of the world where our Mennonite ancestors left examples of hard work, and a well organized community life.
My Pilgrimage to Ukraine

Edwin D. Hoeppner, Winnipeg

Many in our congregation have ancestral or even parental connections to southern Ukraine which, prior to the Russian Revolution and Civil War, was known as New Russia. My own connection there is distant in time, since it was my paternal great-great-grandparents, Peter and Elisabeth (Penner) Hoeppner who, in their sixties, together with their children, including my great-grandfather, emigrated from the village of Michaelsburg in the Fuerstenland Colony to participate in founding Waldheim, near Glencross southeast of Morden, Manitoba in 1876. On my mother’s side it was my great-grandparents Johann and Margaretha (Funk) Reimer who came from the Bergthal Colony to settle in the Blumstein area north of Grunthal, in 1875. In 2007 I made a personal pilgrimage to the soil which was once the home of my forbears.

On September 28, 2007 I headed east, and in Toronto and Frankfurt Germany joined a group of about 184 members. They came from throughout Canada and the USA. One woman with her daughter, who were “Rueckwanderer,” now living in Germany, also joined us. This group made up the 2007 Mennonite Heritage Cruise to Ukraine.

We flew to Kiev where we were bussed from the airport to board the Princessa Dnipro, or Dnieper Princess, a riverboat originally built in former East Germany and re-furbished a few years ago. This ship was our home for the next two weeks. As we boarded the ship we were welcomed with the traditional Ukrainian bread and salt.

As I headed for the tiny cabin I was to share with another fellow-traveller I became aware of a compelling reason to visit the bathroom and narrowly avoided complete disaster. For the trip I was thankful for my plentiful supply of Imodium. It was our policy never to leave the ship without it. My roommate was Ray Kliewer of Cromwell, Connecticut, two years my senior and a retired, very distinguished, animal geneticist. We hit it off very well – so much so that many asked if we were brothers.

When Jews come here they hold a service for the dead. We too, each bus load in unison, read a service for the dead which had been composed by a Rabbi in Toronto to be suitable for use here by Mennonite visitors. For me it was a very moving experience. However, it is also a matter of record that the Soviets never erected memorials like this to its own uncoun ted victims of the Bolshevik and Stalin terror, whose graves are strewn across the territory of the former Soviet Union from Katyn Forest near Smolensk (some distance east of Duhrovna) and Vinnitsa in western Ukraine to Sakhalin Island in the east, and from the Black Sea and the Amur River in the south to the Arctic.

Kiev, a huge city with about three million inhabitants, is beautiful with many trees. Cathedrals and churches have been renovated with gold leaf on the roofs of some, and young priests are a frequent sight in the vicinity. Our buses took us to many churches and other important buildings, and concluded with a visit to the catacombs south of the city, known as Pechersk Lavra, the former monastery in caves, with many mummified monk interments. The crowded dark shuffling tour through some of these underground passages in the dark and the heat of the afternoon gave me a marked feeling of claustrophobia and it was a profound relief to be above ground again.

At one of the nearby churches we saw a Ukrainian wedding party, with the bride in white and the groom in a smart dark suit. Not only was this a Sunday, it was also the day of the national election, and everywhere we encountered crowds of people out for the afternoon.

That evening our ship departed as darkness arrived, and overnight we descended at least one set of locks, at Kaniev (or Kaniv). Thus we missed seeing this place where Catherine II stopped for a day and a night to parlay, at his request, with Stanislas Augustus, the last King of Poland in May 1787 (April 1787 Old Style). On this famous trip south on the Dnieper she also visited and inspected her new acquisitions, and verified for herself what Potemkin had accomplished throughout New Russia. Thanks to the king’s court painter, who painted the scene of Catherine II’s departure, we have a pictorial record of the appearance of the flotilla of imperial barges which carried her and her entourage south.

During the day we cruised southeastward, passing through the next and largest Dnieper reservoir backed up by the next dam at Kremenchug. Unfortunately in this area the Dnieper is so wide, that the river banks, now the shores of a lake, were at times hardly visible from our ship. The series of dams across the Dnieper, known collectively as the Dnieper Cascade, have turned the river into a series of reservoirs connected by short stretches of river, raising the water level and drowning the low-lying areas adjacent to the original river bed. The first of these dams was the one at Zaporozhye and it caused the water level to rise, submerging the original site of the Mennonite village of Einlage/Kitschkas.

In the late afternoon we descended another lock and then passed Kremenchug. Here, on the left bank, Bartsch and Hoeppner were presented to Catherine II on May 13, 1787 (NS), and were invited to join her entourage. We, 220 years later, continued on our way overnight, and near dawn next morning reached Dnepropetrovsk (formerly Yekaterinoslav), where we spent the day being bussed to various sites formerly owned by prominent Mennonite personalities. We also visited a couple of museums, and made a half-hour stop near the palace of Potemkin which is now a student center. Here I picked up a few chestnuts which lay thickly on the ground under trees on every street.
One of the museums we visited had a large room filled with a display of photographs of people killed by the communist administration in the years 1920 to 1940. One of the photographs is of Gerhard Hamm who was one of the two Mennonite designers of the first combine harvester constructed in Russia. It was a haunting display of the impersonal cruelty of Stalin's purges and of his system. Dnepropetrovsk is a beautiful city, with many large trees and interesting buildings. Ray wanted to find a place where he could email his wife and I went with him using a simple map provided by our tour. We managed to get lost and I asked a young woman about to cross the street if she could help us, first in English and then in German. She spoke some English, and so we got back to the ship after a long walk.

One of the buildings we were shown had been the headquarters of the Russian military medical service in World War I. The father of Ken Neufeld (now of Fresno, California, who had grown up in Waldheim, Saskatchewan, one of our tour members) had served in that building as a member of that medical service.

That night we were off to Zaporozhye (or Zaporizhzhia in Ukrainian), formerly Alexandrovsk, which we reached early next morning after descending another lock. Our ship tied up at the landing site on the east bank, just opposite the Island of Khortitsa (Insel Chortitza, Ostrov Khortitsa), which was high on my list of priorities to see. The site of the graves of Jacob Hoeppner (1748 - 1826), his wife Sara Dueck, their son Jacob (1797-1883), and his wife Anna Brandt are on this island. Their gravestones and the well-known monument are now at the Mennonite Heritage Village, Steinbach, Manitoba.

Through our tour and interpreter staff I met and made arrangements with Victor Penner of Zaporozhye for a private tour later that week because, incredibly, the bus tour of the Chortitza Colony and of the island did not include a visit to the grave site of delegate Jacob Hoeppner. Our Cruise Director frequently referred to our cruise as “A Floating Mennonite University,” but I got the impression that Jacob Hoeppner and Johann Bartsch are not really part of the syllabus.

The site of the graves and monument is now a hollow area covered over with a pile of firewood in someone’s backyard garden. Some of us descendants would very much like to erect a suitable marker identifying and consecrating this spot, but this proto-project will require some wider Mennonite community support just as the original monument was created at the time of the centennial celebration year in 1889/90 as the result of collecting donations in both the Chortitza and Molotschna Colonies.

Victor assured me that the local owner of that garden would have no objection to such a monument being placed there. Victor took me to the village cemetery where, with his help, I found the grave-stone of Johann Hildebrand (1828-1905), grandson of Peter Hildebrand (Erste Auswanderung der Mennoniten aus dem Danziger Gebiet nach Sued-russland), and therefore a cousin “once removed” of my great-great-grandfather Peter Hoeppner (1825-1907). The two exchanged numerous letters in the 1880s and 1890s many of which are in the Hoeppner Letters collection at the Mennonite Heritage Center (MHC).
They were both born on the island, grew up there, and were close friends. So I was very pleased to have found this stone.

Johann, in his day the “custodian” of the “Hildebrand Nachlass” (Hildebrand Legacy of historical source documents), came into possession of Bartsch’s papers, and in his letters he is quite explicit on the relationship of Bartsch to the Flemish Mennonite church leadership of his day.13 This source demolishes the credibility of the viewpoint expressed in recent years by the late former publisher/editor of Preservings.13

For the first two or three days most of the tour group participated in all-day bus tours of the Chortitza Colony villages or the Molotschina Colony area, but my plans prevented me from joining these. My first day at Zaporozhye was spent in a private trip with a driver and an interpreter who spoke no English, but did speak German. We traveled to the site of the former village of Neu Schoenwiese, about fifteen kilometers to the east-southeast. It was founded in 1868 and is now called Lezhino.14

Bernhard Hoeppner (1840-1913), the youngest son of Jacob H. (1797-1883) and youngest brother of my great-great-grandfather lived here, as I had discovered from the Hoeppner Letters. He was the last of the Hoeppner descendants to have lived on Insel Khortitsa. It appears that he sold the family homestead some time between his father’s death in 1883, and 1891, the date of his first letter in the collection. He then moved to Neu Schoenwiese.

I went to Lezhino to attempt to find his gravestone. I failed to find it, but did find the gravestone of his wife who died in 1907. Since my return I have learned that after his wife’s death he went to live with his daughter and son-in-law, Katharina and Heinrich P. Janzen of Alexejevka, Ignatyevko.15 Thus I had set out on an impossible quest.

The cemetery is heavily overgrown with tall trees, shrubbery, and weeds. In the dark shade of the trees are the graves of Ukrainians squashed in between the trees, and sometimes even over former Mennonite graves. The cemetery is literally paved with empty beverage containers and bottles - as are all former Mennonite cemeteries in Ukraine. One gets the impression people go there to drink.

One member of our tour who had been born in the “Molosch” and had been evacuated westward in late 1943 found his old home, still in use, and many found graves of relatives. Some of the group had brought suitcases full of medications and toys for the Orphanage, which has been organized in the renovated building of the former Maedchen-schule in Halbstadt/Molochansk.

Due to time conflicts I was unable to tour the Old Colony, but together with seven others, including Abe Friesen of Good News Church and his brother Menno from Elm Creek, Manitoba, went with an interpreter and a driver in a small van or bus to the Fuerstenland Colony. Our first destination was a group of four closely spaced villages Alexanderthal/Rosenbach/Georgsthal/Olgafeld.16 We looked for the Mennonite cemetery between Georgsthal and Olgafeld, but found no trace of it. It appears that all the grave stones have been taken away for use as foundation stones for later buildings. The two villages have expanded toward each other, have become one village and obliterated the graveyard.

We had our customary bag lunch (from the ship) in a Ukrainian cemetery west of Olgafeld. This one was also full of empty bottles and rubbish. Then we went on to the north to Michaelsburg, now known as Mikhailivka. Everything looked poor, shabby and run-down, with some buildings in the process of being dismantled. There are plenty of cats everywhere, but they are bone thin and wary of strangers. It had been a dry summer in Ukraine and the harvest was not good.

We saw that the soil here was good, and judging by a man in Mikhailivka who invited us into his yard, garden and home, is capable of growing good fruit. He kept bees, made his own honey, and wanted to present us with a large heavy jar of it. He had several varieties of grapes and gave us some to eat. He also grew apples, and made his own wine and vodka. We were invited inside his home where his wife immediately prepared snacks and gave us a glass of wine as well as vodka. As we left, he gave us a bottle of his wine. Their hospitality and friendliness were heart-warming.

In Mikhailivka we saw only a couple of houses which, judging by their roof lines, were former German-Mennonite houses. They were made of brick and now were greatly modified. The attached barns were long gone. At least, and at last, I have walked the street(s) and soil on which, 131 years ago, my great-great-grandparents walked for the last time. And we enjoyed the fruit of that land.

It was time to return to Zaporozhye. I could not help wondering what it must have been like when the German Forces came through this area in 1941, and also what scenes may have played out here in Oct/Nov 1943 when the Red Army advanced through here on the heels of the retreating invaders.

On the drive back, we were stopped by the police for no discernable reason. In the end our driver was constrained to “use sinless money,” paid a bribe, and we got back to the ship. Our ancestors, at least those from the Berghthal Colony, had to do that too in 1874 in order to obtain the consent and related documents from the local justice of the peace for the sale of their property, before they could immigrate to Canada.17 Some things don’t change.

Bus loads of us toured Zaporozhye, visited a museum with an exhibit of Mennonite furniture and other artifacts, and saw many of the industrial buildings originally erected for the manufacturing and milling enterprises of Mennonite business men. We also saw a couple of their homes built prior to World War I. Most of these buildings are still in use, but we could only see them from the outside. This city had much less charm than the others we had visited. It has a gitty industrial atmosphere with, as usual, numerous large apartment buildings, many extremely shabby and run-down in appearance. Still, there were also places of pleasant beauty, many trees, and a good beach adjacent to our landing place, with even a sunbather or two, as we neared mid-October.

Across the river there is the beautiful Ostrov Khortitsa, now allegedly under Nature protection, but the villagers on it are still living there and continue dismantling the few remaining brick houses built by Mennonites in the late 19th or early 20th centuries. I photographed one brick house in the process of being dismantled. Inside the brick wall was another wall of wooden planks about 3 1/2 to 4 inches thick. Perhaps the first houses which were built here in the 1790s, of wood “in the German style”, were built with similar planks.18

On this island a replica Cossack Sich has been constructed, which serves as a museum. I did not see it since I was not part of the general tour, but had my private one with Victor Penner who took me first to see the Delegates’ grave and monument.
site and then took me on a tour of Chortitza village. He showed me the great rock at the junction of the Chortitza Rivulet with the Dnieper known as the “Schweinskopf” and we attempted to identify the “Affenkopf” feature as well. This area is extremely picturesque and I was thankful to see it.

As he drove us from the island toward the “Schweinskopf,” a couple of small, but sizable snakes crossed onto the pavement just in front of us. Victor quickly braked his car to a full stop to avoid running over them. He told me these snakes are rare and are under wildlife protection. In Chortitza the Old Oak is almost dead and is propped up with a steel support. A local entrepreneur has built an imposing Orthodox church, right in the middle of the bridge spanning the Khortitsa River here. The church, of brick, is too small to be of practical use, and was padlocked: its purpose probably was to serve as a “draw” for visitors who would supposedly then use a proposed nearby “upscale” restaurant. That has not happened but the rural beauty of the site has been ruined.

During our last afternoon at Zaporozhye the sky began to cloud over and as our ship left that evening the weather turned dull, drizzly, and cooler. During the night we descended another lock near Novo-Kakhovka and in the morning we arrived at the port of Kherson, about 30 km from the sea. Bartsch and Hoeppner made this their working center in the winter of 1786/87, and made many journeys from here in their search for the right location for a colony. As we now know, their decision and the official approval of it, was arbitrarily overruled by Potemkin - the first breach of the Privilegium which they had negotiated.

We were taken in two smaller vessels to a fishing village where we were constrained to “run the gauntlet” through a sort of flea market where everything from fur caps to clothing, jewelry, and other tourist “stuff” was on sale. Eventually we were invited into a building where we were given a selection of Ukrainian foods and dishes plus glasses of wine and vodka. It was very cool and windy so my friend Ray, I, and some others, had two. The land was low, flat, and marshy, overgrown with bush, with numerous summer or weekend cottages (dachas) along the banks.

Then it was back to our ship at Kherson. We got underway toward the estuary of the Dnieper. In 1779, during Soviet times, a party of two German journalists voyaged down the Dnieper from Smolensk to Kherson, but were not allowed to proceed beyond Kherson to the sea. Now, in 2007, thanks to the onward march of history, we were more fortunate. Here in the Dnieper estuary, or Liman, the wind was very brisk and westerly - a head wind for our ship.

This estuary was the scene of a major land battle at Kinburn in 1787 where the Russian defenders virtually annihilated a Turkish amphibious assault by a force of 5,000 men. In the following year, near Kinburn, a series of large naval battles took place between the Turkish and the Russian forces. Then, on 6 December 1788 (OS), St. Nicholas Day, the Russians, commanded by Potemkin, stormed the Turkish fortified port of Ochakov. According to Potemkin’s report to Catherine II, 9,500 Turks and 2,500 Russians were killed in this one battle. Since it was winter, and the ground frozen, the Russians simply carted the bodies out onto the ice of the estuary, the Liman, and left them there in heaps for the spring breakup. After this date there was no further danger of Turkish hostilities threatening the settlement site originally selected by Bartsch and Hoeppner, across the river from Berislav. An analysis of that episode must await discussion at another time.

Contemporary observers commented, after the naval battles, that the waters were green with the bodies of Turks. I was very conscious of these events and stood out on the deck, in the cold October wind, observed in the gathering darkness a beacon sweeping the sky at Ochakov, until at last we reached the Black Sea, and went in to go to bed.

Before going on to describe our visit to the Crimea I think it appropriate to express my disappointment at the utter waste of the opportunity presented by our one day stop at Kherson. This city was founded by Potemkin in 1778 as a protected port, naval base, and shipyard to promote his and Catherine II’s “Greek Project,” a plan to defeat the “Porte,” the Turkish Empire, and to drive the Turks out of Constantinople and out of continental Europe. One of Potemkin’s objectives in founding Kherson was ultimately to destroy the Turkish position at Ochakov, and to establish Catherine II’s glory as the founder of a Black Sea counterpart to Peter the Great’s building of St. Petersburg on the Baltic Sea.

This place was the beginning of the Russian Black Sea Fleet and in his capacity as Grand Admiral, Potemkin is the father
of this fleet. Several thousand Russian lives were destroyed by disease, probably malaria,26 in the construction of this city, and in this it is analogous to the founding of St. Petersburg by Peter the Great. The city has many historic sites and Potemkin’s remains are in the crypt of the Church of St. Catherine. From here Bartsch and Hoeppner made their many journeys to select a settlement site.27 In this context Kherson is central to the beginning of Mennonite settlement in New Russia in 1789/90.

For the purpose of the Mennonite Heritage Cruise it would, in my opinion, have been preferable to have a series of bus tours to visit the Church of St. Catherine and the other historic sites in and near the city, perhaps even a bus tour to Ochakov. One site we should have taken the time to see is the grave of the English prison reformer John Howard who died and was buried near Kherson in 1790. Alexander I erected a monument to his memory at the grave site, and this place is visited by tourists to this day.

Early next morning as we were approaching Sevastopol a small tug came out and approached our ship until it was near enough for the harbor pilot to jump across to our ship and take us in to port. On our right was an enormous statue of a soldier buried near Kherson in 1790. Alexander I erected a monument to his memory at the grave site, and this place is visited by tourists to this day.

When our ship was tied up, we were welcomed by a small brass band. We toured Sevastopol and Crimea for about two days. First we were taken to see the excavated ruins of Chersonesus, an ancient Greek city founded in the fifth century B.C. and which remained, as part of the Byzantine Empire, until it was destroyed in, I believe, the 15th century.28 In 988 A.D. Grand Prince Vladimir of Kiev captured Chersonesus (frequently called Cherson), accepted Christianity, and was baptized in the Church of St. Basil in Cherson. Within the year, he forced his people in Kiev to convert to the Christian faith, too. We were shown the excavated ruins of what is believed to be the church where Vladimir was baptized. We also visited the nearby new Cathedral of St. Vladimir, built after World War II to replace the church that was destroyed during the fighting.

The Russians under Potemkin annexed Crimea in 178329 and immediately began construction of a naval base and port, which is today’s Sevastopol. The construction materials were taken from the ruins of the ancient Cherson on the authorization of Potemkin, thus destroying much archaeological material which would have been invaluable for elucidating the history of the first Cherson.

The city has been rebuilt after World War II in the same style as it was before that war’s destruction. It is very handsome, with many monuments to the heroes of the Crimean War (1853/56) when Britain, France, Turkey, and some Sardinian Allies defeated Russia and destroyed the naval facilities.30 It is odd that we, the student body of the “Floating Mennonite University,” were not taken to see the memorial to the Baltic German Todleben, who exhibited significant leadership in the Russian defense at that time, and who later played a prominent role in negotiations with the Mennonites who were contemplating emigration to North America in the 1870s. This was not the first time I sensed that that earlier emigration did not occupy a prominent place in the thinking or the agenda of the chancellor of the “Floating Mennonite University.”

Leo Tolstoi served in the Russian army as a young artillery officer during the siege. A scene of the siege of Sevastopol is depicted in a vivid diorama which we visited. It is a lifelike reconstruction of one of the Russian strong-points with surrounding depictions of the enemy’s assaults and cannonade complete with scenes of the wounded being tended under fire, and of dead bodies. This display, housed in a circular building, was reconstructed after World War II partly from fragments of the original display that were preserved, and the remainder was recreated.

Then we were taken in buses to Balaklava, passing on the way just to the south of the Valley of Death, where the Charge of the Light Brigade by British cavalry took place. The interpreter/guide in our bus favoured us with a stirring recitation of Tennyson’s eponymous poem and we spontaneously applauded him. Our bus stopped and we wanted to take some pictures, but the Ukrainian Police happened by, stopped, and unceremoniously ordered our driver to clear out of there, which we did.

Balaklava was the port and support base for the British and French forces when a great storm on the Black Sea in November 14, 1854 sank many British and French ships, destroyed their tents and fodder for the horses, and did much other damage. The storm caused much misery for the sick and wounded men. Later, Florence Nightingale31 and the nurses who assisted her alleviated this misery.

One of the ships that sank was carrying medical supplies and warm clothing for the British troops. The investigation of that storm32 established that the storm was caused by an intense low pressure center which had moved southeastward from western Europe to the Black Sea. Had a system of weather observations, coupled with a communications system, been in existence, it would have been possible to provide appropriate warning of the storm to areas toward which the storm center was moving. The insights resulting from the investigation of this intense storm over the Black Sea area ultimately resulted in the expansion of networks of synoptic weather observing stations, which, together with the electric telegraph, facilitated the beginning of modern weather forecasting which is of interest to me as a meteorologist.

There is another Crimean War dimension for me. Abraham Hoeppner (1831-1855), a younger brother of my great-great-grandfather, was a wagon driver in the “Podwodendienst” (transport service) which Mennonites performed for the Tsar in the Crimean War.33 According to my father, the story, as remembered by the family, is that he caught a chill on one of these trips, became seriously ill and died as a result. He is buried in the village cemetery on Insel Chortitza, but his gravestone appears to have disappeared in recent years.

Bartsch and Hoeppner also travelled through Sevastopol in Catherine II’s entourage in 1787. In memory of these connections I picked up some chestnuts from the boulevards. From Balaklava our buses drove along the coastal highway. The scenery is spectacular: towering limestone mountains on the left, the Black Sea on the right, and beautiful green forest between the two. On the pinnacles of rocks are picturesque towns, luxurious palaces, castles, and orthodox churches.

We stopped at the Livadia Palace where the “Big Three” divided up Europe, thus violating the principle of self-determination which, of course, was already violated at the end of World War I. We also stopped at nearby Yalta. It is very lovely, although disfigured by a statue of Lenin near the harbor front. What a come down - some of us had a coffee at MacDonald’s. Then back to Sevastopol and the Dnieper Princess.

In the evening of October 11 we left Sevastopol and headed
northwest across the Black Sea to Odessa, called “Odass” in Plautdietsch according to stories my father had heard handed down as a boy. During the night a wind with waves and quite a swell came up and rocked our ship as I drifted off to sleep.

Next morning we arrived at Odessa and walked, and also were bussed, to several sites including a museum and a cathedral. We saw the famous Potemkin Steps, originally named the Richelieu Steps in honour of the governor Duc de Richelieu, who had them built for easier access from the harbour to the city, which is on a plateau. We could not visit the archives where a treasure-trove of Mennonite records was found about a decade or more ago - they were closed while we were there. The city is very beautiful and many buildings have been restored, above all the Opera House and theatre. Others are in the process of being restored. Many tall trees line the streets that are busy with traffic.

Early next morning, at 03:30 h, the majority of us set off on a six-hour-plus bus trip back to Kiev for our flight to Frankfurt, each of us with a familiar bag lunch from the ship. These bag lunches never varied: two buns, one with ground meat and one with cheese, an apple, and a bottle of water. Having an animal geneticist for a “spiritual brother” and not to be entirely outdone I called these bags “closed lunches.”

Either this bag lunch, or perhaps a similar lunch, which was handed out to us on the Lufthansa flight from Kiev to Frankfurt/Main, resulted in further and persistent “instabilities” in my digestive system the following morning in Germany which could only be resolved by Imodium Advance which I fortunately had with me. The rest of the tour group which had come by Austrian Airlines via Vienna, flew back there from Odessa. I stopped over in Germany and England for about two and a half weeks - and that could be another story.

Two things are essential for a tour to Ukraine, and for travel generally, namely, adequate funds and a plentiful supply of Imodium including Imodium Advance, which in Germany is known as “Imodium-Aktu.” For our cruise we were advised that we should bring a substantial sum in US dollars with us because this is the preferred currency in Ukraine. As I found out, even on the ship we had to pay all our bills, including the fees for the interpreters, drivers and vehicles, in US dollars in cash. They did not have the facilities to process credit cards on board, and it was time consuming and very inconvenient to find a bank to change funds on shore, especially when our time was so filled up with side trips and bus tours.

We had been informed that such fees would be US$35.00 per hour, however, once we had returned from our first side trip we were unpleasantly surprised (blind-sided would be the proper term) to find that these fees were now US$45.00 per hour. As a result I did not have sufficient US cash with me to take the tour to the Berghsal Colony. That was another disappointment for me but, on the whole, the pilgrimage was an enjoyable and moving experience. Wanting to do this for many years, it is an itch that at last I was able to scratch!

Endnotes
1 Home Street Mennonite Church, Winnipeg.
3 Rudy Friesen, Building on the Past (2004), Ch 9.
4 Johann B. Reimer (Winnipeg), and Jacob B. Reimer (Loma Plata, Paraguay), Family Tree of Johann A. Reimer - Margaretha Funk and Descendants 1780-1985 (Printed by The Standard Press, Beausejour, Manitoba, 1986), 19.
7 Montefiore, Prince of Princes, 365.
8 Catherine II leaving Kaniev, by Jan Bogumil Piersch (Allegedly in the Art Gallery at Lviv, Ukraine (formerly Lwow, Poland). This is the only pictorial representation of Catherine II’s Dnieper cruise barges which I have discovered.
9 Montefiore, Prince of Princes, 365.
11 Ed Falk, Translator and publisher, The Hoeppner Letters Folio 2 1877 - 1891, 2004, L18 - p.1, p.2 and p.3, (Letter dated 1890 Feb 24 from Johann Hildebrand, Insel Chortitza to Peter Hoeppner, Waldheim, Manitoba), and L19 - p.1, p.2, p.3 and p.4 (Letter dated December 18, 1890 from Johann Hildebrand to Peter Hoeppner). Original letters at Mennonite Heritage Center, Winnipeg. See Mennonite Historian Vol. XXX No 3 Sept. 2004, 11. Johann Hildebrand (1828 -1905) was the grand-son of Peter Hildebrand (1754-1849). Johann Hildebrand was a first cousin once removed of Peter Hoeppner (1825-1907), i.e. Peter H. and Johann’s father were first cousins.
13 Delbert Plett, “Delegate Jakob Hoeppner - From Bohnsack to Chortitsia” in Preservings No. 20, June 2002, p. 30. The information in the Beilage (Note 12) is convincing evidence that the leadership of the Flemish Congregation did not exhibit a “spirit of love” toward Bartsch after his readmission to congregational membership.
14 Mennonitisches Lexikon (1958); Band III see article “Neu-Schönwiese,” p. 219. See also Rudy Friesen; Building on the Past, pp. 425-429.
20 Kummer mit Batjuschka,” in GEO Das neue Bild der Erde (A German monthly) Nr. 1 Januar 1980 pp. 120-144.
21 R.C. Anderson, Naval Wars In the Levant (Liverpool, 1952), Ch XII “The Fight For the Black Sea 1787-1791.” The Kinburn assault occurred October 12, 1787 (New Style).
24 Hans Halm, Gründung und erstes Jahrzehnt von Festung und Stadt Cherson - Year of Celebration.
25 Donald Francis Lynch, “The Conquest, Settlement and Initial Development of New Russia (the Southern Third of the Ukraine) 1780-1837” (Yale University, Ph. Dissertation, 1965). Ch. 3 “Malaria and the Bubonic Plague.” For another reference to the loss of life in the construction of Kherson see also Hans Halm, Oesterreich und Neurussland - Donau Schiffahrt und Handel 1718 - 1780 (Erster Band) (Breslau, 1943) (“...Cherson...unter unsäglichen Opfern an Menschenleben und Geld mühevoll grossgezogen wurde...” pp. 18/19).
26 Donald Francis Lynch, “The Conquest, Settlement and Initial Development of New Russia (the Southern Third of the Ukraine) 1780-1837” (Yale University, Ph. Dissertation, 1965). Ch. 3 “Malaria and the Bubonic Plague.”
30 John Shelton Curtiss, From Danzig to Russia - Naval Wars In the Levant (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2000), chapters 23, 24, and 25.
32 V. K. Pokrovsky, The Conquest of New Russia (the Southern Third of the Ukraine) 1780-1837 (Yale University, Ph. Dissertation, 1965). Ch. 3 “Malaria and the Bubonic Plague.”
34 Hans Halm, Gründung und erstes Jahrzehnt von Festung und Stadt Cherson - Year of Celebration.
35 John Shelton Curtiss, From Danzig to Russia - Naval Wars In the Levant (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2000), chapters 23, 24, and 25.
36 Simon Sebag Montefiore, The Crimean War - A Russian Chronicle (London, 1977) has more, and much better, maps plus portraits of all the leading Russian officers including one of a younger
Just as there are moments in our lifetime that are more outstanding than others, so this journal is to serve as a reminder of the more outstanding events of my life. I have already made an attempt at setting down my life story on paper a number of times prior to this. We lived through hard times in Russia and further hard times are still ahead of us.

The European war broke out in July 1914 in which Germany was to be annihilated by force. The Germans living in Russia at that time were anxiously looking forward to the end of the conflict. At that time we already had our own home in the province of Voronezh [editor: about 300 kms North West of Zaporozhye], in a place called Kantinovska. These were the first years of our marriage, and we were happy and content with the income I received from our mill.

The liquidation of the German holdings began with the utmost ferocity. When I saw that this law was enacted with such ruthlessness, I began to think of the welfare of my family. At that time my family consisted of four children, my wife, and myself. After much deliberation, we decided in September of 1916 to sell everything and move to the Asiatic part of Russia, that is, to Siberia.

After having sold our property we decided to go to our parents and brothers and sisters for a visit and to say farewell. From there we started out for Siberia. We arrived in Omsk October 1st, 1916. Omsk is located on the Irtysh River. Our temporary travel plan was to go to Pavlodar first. This stretch we had to go by boat, since Pavlodar is also located on the Irtysh River, [editor: about 400 kms south of the city of Omsk.]

Pavlodar is a small town with a population of about 12,000 to 15,000 people. The population is a mixture of Russians, Kirghiz, Tartars, and Germans. It is a comfortable, peaceful town. We lived there for one and one half years. Here, in the course of three months, our oldest two sons died within one week of each other. They both died of a lung disease, which they had contracted as a result of a cold. The first, Peter, was seven and one half years old when he died. The second, Gerhard, was six and one half years old. We felt their loss very keenly. Even to this day, these children are in our memory and it seems as if it were only yesterday when all this happened.

In the course of time I took over a mill again, but this time as renter only. The business went well when, unexpectedly, in February 1917 the government in St. Petersburg collapsed. Now it seemed that we, as Germans, would have an easier lot. The government under Kerensky made no effort to end the war. As a matter of fact, Kerensky seemed all in favor of it. Then in 1917 the October Revolution came about with its solution. Down with the war, down with capitalism, down with citizenship, proletarianism for all countries, unite, unite, was the cry. If the war was terrible for all of Europe, Russia was to experience a further blood bath. An additional terror was ahead for all of Russia. Fully armed hordes went through the country creating havoc. Death and ruination followed these insurgents. These bandits snorted like wild animals and brought everything down to their own level.
It is not my aim to describe the revolution. That can be done by someone else. I will only mention it from time to time as the occasion warrants it.

Under the circumstances we found living in the city very uncomfortable. We decided to move to the country. We rented the mill that I was operating. The one we had already bought for 35,000 rubles was confiscated by the government. So we were free and alone once more. All of this happened in January 1918.

After arriving at the German settlement in Asia, or Siberia, also called Siberian or Barnauler settlement, we rented four desjatin (12 acres) of land with a big house, a yard, and building space.

Soon after this I became interested in building a mill again. We started the project slowly. Then in April the Bolshevik putsch occurred in which the White army under Admiral Kolchak took over. (Admiral Kolchak was executed [shot] in 1920 by the Reds.) He had taken a moderate view of the whole situation which gave some relief to the population in general.

We also went ahead with building our mill with greater courage and enthusiasm.

On June 12, I brought my family from Pavlodar to the village of Gnadenthal by wagon, a distance of 150 verst [editor: One verst was slightly longer than one km.]. It was a difficult journey. My wife wasn’t at all well. On April 28th she had given birth to twins, a boy and a girl. The son soon died, but the daughter survived.

Now the life of a businessman began again. We continued to build with high hopes. The millhouse and the house in which we were to live were finished. The machinery for the mill, however, was nowhere to be found. Then the decision was made to buy a completely equipped mill, transport it to our place, and install the machinery into the mill that I had built. This we did. We bought a mill for 135,000 rubles cash. This mill was 135 kilometers away from us. Next the mill with all its contents was dragged over to our place and the machinery installed. The mill, however, was powered by a gasoline engine which was useless to us, as we were unable to purchase gasoline anywhere. It was just not available. How could we find a solution for this problem? We decided to go to Omsk to look around for a steam engine.

We finally found one that was suitable for our purpose and bought it for 75,000 rubles. We transported it to our place and installed it. This was in June 1919. We started operating in August of the same year. We were so happy that we finally had our own business again, and were now assured of an income.

However, one makes plans but God directs [Man denkt und Gott lenkt]. Already on September 16th, 1919 the first group of Bolsheviks and communists came to pay us a visit. Now what we had always been afraid of happened. Admiral Kolchak could not withstand the might of the Red Army which penetrated Siberia from the Ural Mountains.

On October 1st a number of bandits made their appearance. The whole yard was surrounded. Many of the bandits, fully armed, went into and out of the house where my wife, the children, and our maid were. I stood in front of the mill not knowing what to do. What would happen now? What could I do? I called upon God in this serious dilemma. He heard my prayers and responded favorably. We sustained no injuries. What the bandits took in the form of money or other goods was no problem to us. The bandits went away, but soon came back again. However, the Lord’s strong hand shielded us and we experienced His protection.

After a while, all our property was confiscated. By 1922 the government ordered our whole yard, including the mill and everything that went along with it, to be vacated. Many things happened in the meantime, however we didn’t have to suffer as much as our brethren in southern Russia. Our suffering resulted largely from fear. Things got steadily worse in Siberia.

However, we battled on courageously. We managed to fulfill the conditions of our contract. This was not to the liking of a neighbor, a communist, who was given the administration of another mill which he did very sloppily. He talked and talked, until finally through lies and innuendoes, he had us dislodged from our premises. All this happened in August of 1923.

This naturally had a negative effect on my health. In October I decided to go to southern Russia once more to visit my parents and my brother and sisters, and to recuperate. The real object of my trip was to settle my parents into a permanent home. However, due to my reduced financial circumstances, I was not able to do so.

After having seen all my family, I embarked on the ten-day railway journey back home to Siberia. On the way home the thought of possibly immigrating to Canada came to me. I arrived home and found everything in good order. Soon my journey.
On July 26th we arrived back in Moscow.

On the 27th we received our passports and left shortly after that. On July 29th, 1924, we crossed the border between Russia and Lithuania. Thank God we were out of Russia. We continued traveling until we came to the station Reshiza. Here we had to stop. We all had to go to the bath house and bathe. All our clothes and belongings were disinfected.

After two days we continued to Riga. Here we were all examined again. Thank God everything went well. From here we continued until we came to the border of Germany. We crossed over into Germany on August 1st, 1924. We liked Germany very much. Everything was German: people, language, and customs. I would gladly have stayed here, but we had to move on.

Soon we arrived in Berlin. Here we had to wait twelve hours for our train which was to take us to the Dutch border. At last the train came. We arrived in Rotterdam at five o'clock in the evening. Here our passports were inspected again. This procedure cost us six dollars. We had to bathe again and our clothes were again disinfected. Then we were taken to a hotel for the night. The next day we looked around Rotterdam. A bit. In the evening at five o'clock we boarded the big steamer Sparrndam of the Holland America Line. For boarding we were accompanied by several Dutch brethren. The ship started out at six p.m. on August 6. A deep emotion mixed with sadness and joy gripped our hearts as we started out. Oh how we prayed that God would be with us on this journey. Today we can praise Him. He helped us more than what we had prayed for. For a long time we stood and looked at the receding shores of Holland.

At 7 p.m. the signal was given for supper to be served. Four hundred passengers on board: Jews, Germans, Russians, Arabians, and we Mennonites. The next day, in France, some Frenchmen were added to the passenger list. The going was quite smooth. The weather was cool and dull. Our ship sailed on. The nights were cool. On August 8th, we arrived at the Spanish port of Bilbar. Here we stopped for over a day. Many people came to the ship and much baggage and freight was added. Bilbar is a small, but not a nice town. The harbor isn’t nice either. The shoreline is bare and stony.

On the 10th we came to the second harbor. This one was a little more attractive. The harbor is surrounded by tall mountains which, however, are all bare. We went along a canal until we finally came to the harbor Santander. Here there were stately palm trees guarding the shore line. Everything in Santander was different. The language spoken was Spanish. We went to the market place and made a few small purchases. Then we went back to the ship. In a few hours we were on our way again.

We sailed along the coast of Spain on our way to the La Caruna harbor. We arrived there at noon on August 11. The harbor, the town, and the shore line are all very nice, just like Santander. Here again much freight was loaded, especially red onions. Also, many kegs of wine were added so that the passengers would have enough to drink on the voyage. The wine was quite good except it was somewhat sour.

After two days we were on our way again. We went further along the Spanish coast until we came to the Harbor Vigo, close to Portugal. Vigo was the last station in Europe where we could stop. Vigo is not nice; not the harbor, nor the shore line, nor the town. Here we stayed for three days. The ship loaded machinery of various kinds. It also took on red onions and small kegs of red wine. At the end of the third day a horde of Spanish workers came onto the ship. They were bound for Cuba to work in the tobacco plantations.

On the 15th of August we were off again with the objective of crossing the ocean. The sea was restless with the wind rising. The ship was riding high on the crest of the waves at one time and then was down in the trough the next time. That is how we sailed into the night. Slowly the shores of Spain receded and with it the shores of Europe as well. Next morning the sea was calm. The weather was beautiful and everyone was on deck. It continued that way for the next two days.

Three days after our departure from Vigo, early in the morning, we saw, in the distance, a large mountain looming up. We heard the cry “Land.” It happened to be breakfast time, but everyone hurried out to see this sight. We took our atlas which we always had at hand, to see where we really were. On the map we noticed the Portuguese island of Azores. Now we actually saw it. The mountain got bigger and bigger as we approached it. As we approached the island, and got close to it, we estimated that it was about 25 to 30 square miles in size. It took us about one and a quarter hours to pass it. For a while we kept it in view.

It got warmer on the fourth day. On the fifth day it became still warmer. They built a canopy over the deck which resulted in a welcome coolness. The sea was calm and we continued on our way from sunup to sundown. Also music and dancing were not wanting. Here we saw, for the first time, a Spanish Indian dance. It is hard to describe, so I won’t try. On this voyage we met ships from different countries, white, yellow, red, and black. We also saw schools of fish as well as flying fish.

On board ship a person makes various acquaintances. I had the honor of becoming acquainted with the commander of the ship. These were generally good people. They all spoke German fairly well. The purser also invited people into his cabin.
The days got to be warmer the closer we got to the West Indies.

On the ninth day we had a wind that was increasing in strength. In the evening all the windows and entrances were locked up. The storm raged terribly and by morning almost everyone was seasick. There was groaning, vomiting, and lamenting, with sick people everywhere. I was also affected as were two of our children. Only my wife, Jacob and Lena remained well. They laughed and jeered at us. The next day the sea was calm and nice, and our ship sailed majestically toward its destination.

On the 11th day we could see land in the distance. Oh how glad we were to see land once more. With the help of our binoculars we were able to see part of the West Indies. It was warm. People wanted cold water to drink which was given to them. Ice was put into the water to cool it. Everyone drank and was delighted with it. It became warmer all the time.

On the 12th day after leaving the harbor of Vigo, we crossed the southern tip of Florida. Oh what joy: land, land, land! On the same day, towards evening, we reached the Cuban harbor of Havana. Hundreds disembarked and went to the tobacco plantations to look for work. Others stayed in Havana to process onions and package them. Trains constantly went back and forth from the harbor. Others, who disembarked, helped to unload the ship. It was very hot. Among the workers that helped to unload the ship were many blacks, that is, Negros. Judging from their appearance these fellows were all physically strong. Only the necessary parts of the body were clothed. Otherwise they were naked. It was uncomfortably sultry.

One night we had a rainstorm accompanied by thunder and lightning. The ship stayed there for three days. A friend, Mr. P. Penner and I, decided to see Havana. The harbor and town were quite nice. There is much business going on and lots of traffic. However, it is not clean. Havana is a Latin city, therefore the spoken language is Spanish. Cuba has its own President.

At one time, while we were still on the high seas, my friend, Mr. Gerhard Wedel and I conceived the idea of wanting to see the inside of the ship. We sought permission to do so. We were provided with a guide and away we went. We were surprised at the size of the storage rooms. There was storage space for ice, flour, etc. It was hot in the boiler room. The workers there only worked four hour shifts. There were two big steam engines. However, only one was working. The other one was on standby, under full steam, ready for any emergency.

There was good order on the ship. Everything was tolerable except the food. It was too Spanish to suit me. The soup was hardly edible. However, the Spaniards ate it with relish. The rest of the food was quite good. There was enough meat. The bread was very good. There was always enough juice from preserved fruit. In the evening there was music and dancing. On the third class deck there also was a lively party going on. An accordion was brought into action and people either watched or danced.

After the three days in Havana we left and continued our journey. In three days we arrived in the harbor of Vera Cruz, Mexico. The harbor is nicely and artistically arranged. Worth of mention is the big lighthouse which can be seen from off-shore.

Not everyone from Europe takes to the people of Mexico. This is especially true of the workers in the harbor. It seemed to us that the main objective of the workers in the harbor was to do as little as possible. The currency of Mexico is the peso. In spite of that, the harbor workers demanded to be paid in American dollars for any service rendered to the general public. It is peculiar, yet it is true. There is a person who is in charge of the whole operation. The police and authorities can’t do anything about it because of fear of the workers. So the workers get away with it. Anyone who is not acquainted with the system better be careful when engaging a person to carry his baggage. In Vera Cruz and also in Tampico they charged $3.00 per package whether big or small. The harbor police see to it that you pay.

Our ship stayed at anchor for two days and 12 hours in Vera Cruz. Almost all the cargo on the ship was unloaded in Vera Cruz. The rest went along with us to Tampico. The trip from Vera Cruz to Tampico took two more days. We arrived in Tampico on September 5th, 1924, all well and in good spirits.

We had been on the Dutch ship, the Spaarndam, for one month less a day. That was a long and at times a difficult journey. Now we were to live in Mexico and find out how we were to fare in a land where we didn’t know the language, the people, the customs, or the laws. It took a long time till we were through customs. Even though we didn’t have anything to declare, we still had to pay the custom officer $10.00. In Tampico we came across a German youth who had already acquired knowledge of the Spanish language. He was a great help to us. We stayed in Tampico for three days. Then we were off to Chihuahua.

Now we were on our own. We had to fend for ourselves for the rest of the way. The fields that we passed were all desert and bare. The rivers were all dried up too. It was only rarely that we came to a river that still had a little water in it. The country was very mountainous. With few exceptions, the mountains were all covered with grass.

The people that we met all lived in small earthen huts, or in huts made of straw. The people, Mexicans, were a mixture of Spanish and the indigenous Indians. They were exceptionally polite in front of us, but otherwise not. Thieving is their second nature. One couldn’t leave anything unattended in the open. A Mexican will not leave his abode without his dagger. Polite in front of us, but otherwise not. Thieving is their second nature. One couldn’t leave anything unattended in the open. A Mexican will not leave his abode without his dagger. Practically everyone, especially the woman, seemed to be smoking. (The sight of a woman smoking, I suspect, was so new to my father that this was more apparent than true.)

We were in Mexico two years minus eight days. I really didn’t want to get involved in the Mennonite land settlement controversy in Mexico. I wanted to wait until the facts would clarify themselves in the course of time, at which time everyone could form his own opinion. However, I will give a brief account of the controversy. In doing so I must mention several names and produce some letters to verify my remarks. Whether this is advisable is debatable. However, the truth must be brought out.

In Rotterdam, Holland, we got the assurance from the brethren Gorter and Thiessen that the settlement plan regarding going to Mexico had been finalized. We even got a letter to that effect from a member of the board. Mennonites from Russia could go to Mexico without any problem. Sustenance and lodging were assured. For us it was very encouraging to hear that. However, we would soon become more closely acquainted with the situation and find that many things were different from what we had read and heard.

The long journey across the ocean lasted from August 6 to September 5, 1924. It was very tiring. We sailed on the ship Spaarndam for a whole month. Finally we were able to

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disembark. This was a very welcome occurrence. We were all tired and nearly exhausted.

On the trip we had heard a great deal about how dangerous it was to live in Mexico, so we decided to take every precaution possible. In Tampico, we looked around for someone who was in charge of the whole immigration process. However, no one was to be found. It meant quite literally, “help yourself.” There were a lot of people there, but no one showed up who was responsible for the foreign Russian Mennonites.

We were in an unpleasant situation. Then, suddenly a Mexican stood before us. He asked us whether we were Mennonites, and whether we had any money. Many Mexicans, it seemed, stood around us and saw in us the possibility of making money. Some cried out to us, “come let us go to customs.” Others asked us in Spanish whether we had any money. We poor Mennonites found ourselves in the middle of this chaos, confusion, and frustration. We couldn’t speak Spanish. They couldn’t speak German. Neither of us could speak English. Only those who have been in similar circumstances can imagine how we felt.

Finally we found a young man who had been in Mexico for more than a year. He had by this time acquired some knowledge of the Spanish language. This young man helped us by being an interpreter for us. He also told us that the Mexican young man who had asked us whether we were Mennonites, was actually an employee of the Wells Fargo company in Tampico. This company had been authorized by the colonization board in Newton, Kansas, to be of assistance to the Russian Mennonites coming to Mexico. At first, we were dubious about this story, and refused to believe it. Two days later this same man came to where we were staying, and showed us a telegram from the board in Kansas requesting us to go to Chihuahua. The telegram was written in English, therefore we couldn’t read it and we had to take his word for it.

He was instructed to direct all Mennonites to Chihuahua. It took us a while to gain confidence in this man, but finally we decided to go along with him. The Wells Fargo company provided us with a wagon with which to transport our baggage to the station.

The distance from our living quarters to the station was about one quarter of a mile. The wagon they provided was very small. It would take at least three trips to transport all our baggage to the station. We asked the driver what his charge would be for the three trips, he told us that it would be 25 pesos per trip. We decided not to pay that exorbitant price so we paid him 25 pesos for his services rendered thus far and hired another driver. He transported all our baggage to the station for three pesos. Others, arriving after us, experienced even worse dealings with the local Mexicans. That about summarizes our experiences on arrival in Tampico, Mexico.

From Tampico, we went to Chihuahua. There we stayed for three days, until people told us that we still had to continue to Rosario, where land had been purchased for the Russian Mennonites. It was a seven hour trip from Chihuahua to Rosario. A Mexican agent helped us purchase tickets for the trip. Fortunately, as settlers, we got the tickets at a reduced price. Finally, we got to Rosario. At the beginning, everything looked bright and rosy.

Then on October 2nd, there was a severe frost during the night and everything froze. What had been nice and green overnight became yellow, wilted, and limp. Most of the corn and beans weren’t ripe yet. This early frost gave us a great deal of food for thought. We wrote to the board regarding this. We waited a long time for an answer, but none came. The people became restless. They thought that too much time had elapsed until they could go to work. Those who still had some means of their own were afraid that the little they had would run out before they could provide for themselves.

The proprietor of the ranch at Rosario assured us that we could continue to live there. He was certain that the Board in the USA, would honor their agreement regarding the purchase of the land. That was just what we didn’t want. We decided amongst ourselves not to interfere with the sale of the land, and we wanted to inform the board of what we had seen, heard, and experienced so that no unnecessary expenses need be made on our behalf. We knew that any money advanced to us would need to be repaid. We were quite willing to do so, but not for land purchased in Rosario.

Even today I am of the opinion that everyone who got money from the board for relief purposes should repay it at a future time. I have a very low opinion of anyone who keeps his money stashed away in his pocket, and takes as much as he can get from the colonization Board for his own use.

We have people of that kind living right here in Rosario. These people are also constantly dissatisfied with the way the welfare committee distributes the money sent by the Board. That is why these people seek an audience with the Board, so that they can report their side of the story. Hence all the letters to the Board, which greatly influenced Mr. G. Hiebert.

I was asked by the Board to be in management for a while, namely, to be responsible for the distribution of the relief money sent by the Board. The money was to be distributed correctly and used for the purpose for which it was sent. In that capacity I was being falsely accused of shortchanging these people. For instance, there were certain people who wouldn’t take rye flour, or second grade wheat flour, because they thought that the dark bread that it produced was harmful to their health. When the next shipment arrived, we tried to even it out, but they still thought that they were being mistreated. So they wrote poisonous letters to Mr. Hiebert, accusing us of mishandling the situation. I could cite more instances of this nature, but I will let one suffice.

In this connection we also became acquainted with Mr. P.J. Klassen who was authorized by the Board to oversee the loading and unloading of railway cars of things sent by the Board. Mr. Klassen was greatly insulted by a young man by the name of Schellenberg. For this he was thoroughly chastised by a flogging. As a result of this, he apologized to Mr. Klassen and promised not to repeat the offense.

There was much bickering back and forth with the Board. For three months we actually didn’t get anywhere. A group of thirty families then decided to look for land elsewhere. The land we were interested in had been seen by Mr. A. Loewen, a Russian immigrant. We also took into consideration that 800 hectares of land had already been bought in that area.

On the private railway to Chihuahua we had to pay full fare. However, from Chihuahua to Trafenato, where the land was located, we got free tickets, since we were prospective settlers looking at the land. After comparing it with the land in Rosario, we liked the land we saw. We decided to buy it. There was nothing else for us to do, so we went back to Rosario and told the people there everything that we had seen in the three short days that we had been there. We all decided to go
south, except for a small group, who decided to stay in Rosario. (These, however, have since left to go to Canada.) We notified the Board of our decision.

The Board gave us $200.00 to defray the cost of moving from Rosario to Trafenato. Moving from Rosario to Chihuahua was our expense. In Chihuahua we were given several railway cars for moving free of charge to Trafenato.

Many in the USA were dubious about our move. Many told us how difficult it would be for us to make a go of it. They were wondering why we left Rosario. However, there were some who were more sympathetic and tried to understand our plight.

No Mr. Hiebert was to be seen. The general sentiment was that we were to look after ourselves from here on. There was no question about that, as far as we were concerned. Yet there was a certain amount of apprehension about the whole matter with us as well. We were strangers in the land. We didn’t know the language, customs, or climate. And, the Board had promised to help us if need arose.

After arriving in Trafenato we first of all inspected the tract of land in San Juan that had been bought. We occupied the land in February, 1925. Now a new chapter began for us in Mexico. We all found lodging on the ranch and were happy and encouraged. Soon it was clear that some would require assistance from the Board. This fact was conveyed to the Board and the work went ahead. “In unity there is strength,” was our motto.

Because no down payment was required, a small group of us went to Los Animas. There a letter arrived from the Board, indicating that they wanted to help those in need. They told us to organize ourselves, fill out a questionnaire, and then they would see what they could do.

The weaker ones were assisted by the wealthier ones, until the latter came to the place where they too couldn’t help any more, and they were themselves in a position of requiring help. The help they received was two to six pesos per person per month. Then we received a letter with the news that the Board was sending out two men, with an ample supply of relief goods and with the authority to distribute them.

One of these men, Mr. Cornelius Franz, was a welcome visitor for the people in Trafenato. The other man, Mr. B. Klassen was also very welcome. However, the two car loads of relief goods didn’t come till later, with Mr. Bahnman. On Pentecost we got an unexpected visitor from Newton Kansas. Brother Krehbiel visited us for several days and acquainted us with their plan.

Their plan was to continue to help us and undergird us where possible. The work in San Juan continued. Then, after a time, we got another visitor, Mr. G. Hiebert. He stayed in town in a hotel. He came to see us from time to time. He emphatically told us that no money would be loaned to Mexico. The people in Kansas were afraid to loan money in Mexico. Also, he told us, that San Juan would not survive for various reasons. I was certain that, in this case, Mr. Hiebert was either ignorant of the situation or deliberately spreading lies. I wrote to a Mr. Enns in Newton, Kansas, personally asking for a loan. This loan was forwarded to me in full through the Board.

In July 1925 another group of Russian Mennonites arrived. Among them were my dear parents and some of my brothers and sisters. We were notified of their arrival by pastor Garter.
of Rotterdam, Holland. These immigrants were practically all without means. This fact was soon brought to the attention of the Board in Newton, Kansas. The most recent arrivals were able to continue to Trafenato at the expense of the Board on borrowed money.

After the arrival of these immigrants, Mr. Hiebert soon made his appearance to straighten out their accounts. What was particularly significant was that Mr. Hiebert reiterated time and time again, that San Juan would not survive. Too much money was paid for it. It was too close to the city. The climate wasn’t suitable, and so on, and so on. I had already come to the same conclusion. My brother-in-law bought a small farm, but already had concerns about it. My brother, Abram Goertzen, was advised by me not to buy in San Juan.

In October, 1925 a larger group of Mennonites came, among whom were some good friends of ours. With the influx of all these immigrants in the fall of 1925, they really didn’t know where to go. Many had to live in huts in Trafenato. Those who were more affluent had a choice. These people went on to Canada. The rest wanted to stay in Mexico, mainly because they didn’t have the means to go anywhere else.

It didn’t take long before these people were offered land by the land agents. A certain Mr. Fr. Hey from Mexico City, together with Mr. G. Hiebert, came to see us. Mr. Hiebert said that Mr. Hey would come to Trafenato the next day to give a lecture on his 22 years experience in Mexico. This he did with Mr. Hiebert present. I wouldn’t have commented about this any further, hadn’t Mr. Hey said that all those who claimed that Mr. Hiebert had brought him there were not telling the truth.10

Now I would like to point out something that raised quite a stir among the citizens of San Juan. Mr. Hiebert had said that if two-thirds of the people of San Juan would like to immigrate to Canada, means would be provided to help them. (I think that if this assertion had been made in the USA it would have been stated differently. However, fact remains fact.)

One person from the group who had gone to Canada through Mr. Hiebert’s efforts with money loaned by the Board, told me that it had been true after all - what Mr. Hiebert had promised had been done. He was thankful that there were people who had made it possible.

Those who come as settlers to a new country also know what goes along with it. There is much difficulty and misunderstanding to overcome. This also applied in San Juan.

Much of what I didn’t approve of, I had to pretend was all right for the sake of keeping the peace. This sometimes comes back to haunt us. For instance, an article was published in one of the papers in which Mr. Hiebert was portrayed in a most favorable way. I didn’t want to sign that article because I was of a different opinion. However, people prevailed upon me to do so. So, for the sake of keeping the peace I did sign it, hoping by doing so that the controversy would cease. However, in the end that did not happen. So I must confess that what I did, I did against my better judgment. If people now accuse me of misrepresenting the truth, I just have to say, “everything has it’s time.”11

Postscript

This is the end of my father’s journal. I do not know why he didn’t write more; I so much wish he would have. During the reading of this journal, and in typing it into my computer, I feel I’ve had a really rare privilege. I have gotten to know my father. I feel I’ve had a glimpse into his mind. What a serendipitous
pleasure God has given me now half a century later. I was only eight years old when my father died. All of what was written in this journal occurred well before I was born.

The Russian experience was much more frightening than the journal conveys. My sister Adeline tells the story of their journey through the Red Gate at Riga, Latvia, as if it were a miracle. She states that my father got off the train after passing through the gate, and kissed the ground in a spontaneous expression of joy and thankfulness to be out of the USSR. History has of course proven his fears and his joys to be true.

The Mexico experience was a very short one. Again, God obviously had other plans for the Goertzen family. They moved to Canada in 1925-26. Of my father’s family, his parents and two sisters came to Canada. His brother Abram (my uncle) stayed in California, where he settled near Reedley, California, and lived there until he died, at an old age. I’ve met my three cousins Abe, Jake and Marie, quite a few years ago now, on several occasions. I know Jake has passed away some years ago. I do not know if the others are still alive. My father’s father, my grandfather, died in Manitou, Manitoba, at the age of 74. My father’s mother, my paternal grandmother, died in McAuley, Manitoba, while living with my aunt Elizabeth, my father’s sister. She was 93. I remember her quite well as she spent many years living in our home, even after my father, her son, had passed away.

My father’s two sisters, Aunt Elizabeth (Wiens), and Aunt Tina (Dirks) have both died years ago. Because they all lived far away from where I grew up, I hardly knew them, or their families. I have learned to know some of them over the past few decades.

My mother was an orphan. I do not know any of her family. I believe her family name was Neufeld. I don’t believe any of her family ever left Russia.

From Mexico my parents moved to Manitou, Manitoba. My sister Mary, two years my senior and I were born there. My family farmed there for a few years, but had to move north to Fork River, Manitoba, during the Depression, when I was 4 years old.

My father died of heart disease when I was eight years old. He had been a successful business man (miller) in the Ukraine, and in Siberia. He was a good father and husband. He was a natural leader in his community. In his later years he was a lay minister in the Mennonite community in the Fork River/Winnipegosis Conference Mennonite Church. He was not a successful farmer. Even though I was a young child when he passed away, I can still recall him saying that he didn’t enjoy farming. I might add here, that this dislike of farming may be genetic, as I didn’t like farming either. I know of several of my nephews, with the same genetic trait. We may have all inherited it from him.

I am forever grateful for the huge sacrifices made by my parents in enduring the hardships of emigrating from their home in Siberia, to Mexico, and then to Canada. It seems they did it all to be free. They had a vision that it was natural for people to be free. And, they did it, so that we, and our children, could enjoy the wonderful freedoms of Canada. I know they
and wedding plans were made. Grandpa Peter was baptized long before Grandpa Peter fell in love with his parents’ maid here and was able to help support her widowed father. Wages were very meager, but Grandma Margaret was happy out as a maid to the David Schellenberg family at Neuanlage, poor. Due to these circumstances Grandma Margaret was hired to farm with his father, David, and Grandma Margaret's families settled on the East Reserve in the early 1880's and homesteaded in the village of Bergthal. It was here that Grandpa Peter grew to manhood and learned the art of farming.

In 1892 things began to look brighter for Grandpa Peter and Grandma Margaret Schellenberg. They were now a typical Mennonite family and extremely happy together. In 1892, Jacob was a young man my parents cared for after his parents died. They brought Jacob to Canada. He soon left to go on his own. I never saw him. I don’t believe he ever visited my parents again.

Life Story of Rev. Peter and Margaret Schellenberg
Sommerfeld Mennonite Church, Gouldtown, Saskatchewan

Menno Hildebrand (d. 1993)

This article is written for the benefit of those descendants of Peter and Margaret Schellenberg who are interested in remembering and honoring some events that have played a part in shaping our destiny. It is to this couple that we owe our physical existence. Throughout the article Peter and Margaret Schellenberg are referred to as Grandpa Peter and Grandma Margaret for the sake of brevity and clarity. All information is authentic, even though in some cases the stories may vary slightly from the actual, due to slightly conflicting information. Most of the information was obtained from John Schellenberg and Maria Schellenberg Hamm, children of Peter and Margaret Schellenberg.

Grandpa Peter and Grandma Margaret were both born in Russia in 1868, March 3 and February 28 respectively. They came to Canada, Manitoba, in the late 1870’s. Grandpa Peter’s and Grandma Margaret’s families settled on the East Reserve near Niverville. Grandpa Peter’s family moved to the West Reserve in the early 1880’s and homesteaded in the village of Neuanlage, near Gretna, Manitoba. It was here that Grandpa Peter grew to manhood and learned the art of farming.

Grandma Margaret’s family, the Unger family, remained at Niverville where Grandma Margaret’s father was widowed at an early age. Besides being widowed, he was considered very poor. Due to these circumstances Grandma Margaret was hired out as a maid to the David Schellenberg family at Neuanlage, near Gretna. These happened to be Grandpa’s parents. The wages were very meager, but Grandma Margaret was happy here and was able to help support her widowed father.

Unfortunately, or maybe fortunately, depending how you look at it, this state of affairs did not last very long. It wasn’t long before Grandpa Peter fell in love with his parents’ maid and wedding plans were made. Grandpa Peter was baptized on June 9, 1889 at Edenburg just east of Neuanlage into the Bergthal Mennonite Church. Grandma Margaret was baptized on the same day at Chortitz near Niverville on the East Reserve, into the Chortitzer Mennonite Church. On November 12, 1889 they were married at Chortitz by Rev. Abram Schroeder.

Immediately after their wedding, they set up housekeeping in a small house on Grandpa Peter’s father’s yard in Neuanlage, near Gretna. Grandpa Peter farmed with his father, David, and his only brother David, who was his senior by seven years. In due time he purchased a “huiskogle” in Neuanlage, which consisted of 20 acres, but he never lived on it. He also rented 160 acres from an M. Klassen. To further supplement his income, he did custom threshing and owned a third part of an elevator in Gretna, together with A. Klassen and D. Klassen. After some years the Klassen land was sold and Grandpa Peter had 160 acres less to farm.

In the meantime, children were born to this happy carefree union. Their first daughter, Anna, was born in 1890. Their joy was short lived when Anna was born with the umbilical cord wrapped around her throat. She was strangled and died very shortly after birth. In 1891 their second child, another daughter, was born and named Aegathsa. Aegathsa was born with jaundice and passed away two days after birth. It was with heavy hearts that they buried their second daughter in the cemetery at Neuanlage.

In 1892 things began to look brighter for Grandpa Peter and Grandma Margaret. It was in this year that their first son was born, a normal healthy boy, named after his father. In 1894 Aegathsa was born, in 1895 Margaret, in 1897 David, in 1898 Henry, in 1900 Maria, and in 1901 a daughter Anna. They were now a typical Mennonite family and extremely happy after a sad beginning. Shortly after the birth of Anna, Grandpa

Endnotes
1 Peter, Gerhard #1, Henry, and Adeline.
2 Anna (nee Neufeld)
3 Gerhard Peter Goertzen, my father and writer of this journal.
4 Diagnosis would be that they died of acute pneumonia.
5 Annie
6 It was understood from verbal communication from my father that refusal to immigrate to Canada was based on medical grounds. My father had suffered a fractured right arm while serving in the “Forestry Service” during WWI. “Forestry Service” was an alternative to serving in the Russian Army, arranged for Mennonite men, by the Mennonite leadership in Russia. Mennonites, based on their understanding of Scripture, were pacifists. This injury resulted in my father being unable to fully extend his arm at the elbow. (suprachondylar fracture, I believe) Immigration to Canada was refused on these grounds. A Conservative government unable to fully extend his arm at the elbow. (suprachondylar fracture, I believe)
7 Jacob was a young man my parents cared for after his parents died. They brought Jacob to Canada. He soon left to go on his own. I never saw him. I don’t believe he ever visited my parents again.
8 Lena is an adopted sister. As an adult she preferred to be called Adeline. (Mrs. Adeline (Jake) Goossen) She lives in Winkler, Manitoba. Her parents died in an epidemic in Russia. My parents adopted her and she became one of the family. Adeline is a gracious and caring sister.
9 My comment.
10 I find, as did Dr. Epp in its translation, great difficulty in understanding all the innuendos my father refers to in these paragraphs. Apparently, there was considerable disagreement among the settlers. Furthermore, it seems there was some difficulty in trusting some of the Board’s people during all this as well. I guess it really doesn’t matter, as they all soon left Mexico in any case. I gather most of them never saw each other again.
11 I assume my father is referring to the interpersonal difficulties which were occurring among the people in San Juan. There was considerable dissension. He has referred to a little of it before. To keep the peace, the leaders, (one can assume my father was one of them) had to be very tolerant, and not too easily hurt.
12 Uncle Abram and Aunt Marie’s three children.
13 Peter.
14 Marie.
15 Elizabeth plus Abe Wiens. Their children are: Betty, Elizabeth, Pete, Abe, Margarete and Lena.
16 Tina plus Peter Dirks. Their children are: Peter, Henry, Erna (deceased).

With gratitude, their youngest son, George. 4/18/95

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Grandpa Peter's parents, who were fast aging, needed more care than they themselves could give. So Grandpa Peter and Grandma Margaret, with their seven children, were asked to move in with Grandpa Peter's aging parents and take care of them. They had no sooner moved in when another baby was due. This time complications set in and a doctor had to be summoned. The baby was in breech position and the doctor repositioned the baby with his hands and the delivery proceeded. Grandma Margaret was under a general anesthetic for this procedure. In repositioning the baby the doctor had twisted the baby's arm.

The baby was in great pain after the delivery. Nearby, neighbors heard the baby groan in pain. Little Henrietta lived for only five hours. Grandpa Peter and Grandma Margaret then buried their third daughter in the Neuanlage cemetery.

To make up for the loss of their third daughter in 1903, little John was born in 1904. To augment the family even more Jake came along in 1906, Abe in 1908, George in 1911, and finally Henrietta in 1912. They now had a complete dozen and seemed happy to settle for that.

The death of Grandpa Peter's father in 1911 changed things in Grandpa Peter's and Grandma Margaret's life and home. They no longer had to care for his aged father. They now had twelve children of their own. Shortly after Grandpa Peter's father's death, Grandma Peter's mother went to live in Halbstadt with Grandpa Peter's oldest sister, Mary, Mrs. Martin Klassen. For a few years Grandpa Peter was still able to rent the land from the estate. In 1913 the family decided to clear up the estate. Grandpa Peter had two sisters and one brother. An agreement was reached that the oldest son should have the option to purchase all the land. So David Schellenberg, Grandpa Peter's older brother, bought the land which Grandpa Peter had rented for many years. This reduced Grandpa Peter's holdings to only the 20 acres he owned, and the one third share of the elevator in Gretna, and no house to live in. With fourteen mouths to feed, something had to be done soon.

Grandpa Peter looked around for land to purchase. By 1913 large areas of Manitoba were already settled by Mennonites and suitable land did not seem readily available. There were rumors that there was plenty of good land available in Saskatchewan. Grandpa Peter's and Grandma Margaret's good friends, the Jacob Hamms from Edenburg, had already moved to Saskatchewan. As well as Grandpa Peter's cousin, the Jacob Schellenberg family, had moved to the same area in Saskatchewan. So in 1913 Grandpa Peter went to Saskatchewan alone to visit his friends and cousin in the Gouldtown area north of Herbert. While there he found a suitable half section immediately adjacent to the Jacob Hamm farm and purchased it. Grandpa Peter paid $8,000 for this half section, which included buildings. He put $1,000 down and was to make payments of $500 annually with an interest rate of 7 percent. He purchased the land from Thomas Sawatzky who resided in Herbert.

When Grandpa Peter came home in the fall of 1913 and shared the news with the family, everyone was excited about moving, except his daughter Aganetha who already had a steady boyfriend, John Hildebrand from Edenburg. Plans were made for the long journey to Saskatchewan. They planned to leave in the spring of 1914. In preparation for the journey, six large sows were slaughtered in the late fall of 1913. All the meat, except the hams would be used to feed the family through the winter and the hams would be ideal to take along on the journey and to start off with in their new home.

Grandpa Peter sold his 20 acre “huiskogle” to a friend, He traded his share in the elevator in Gretna for a 1913 Rio automobile. A man, named H. Ritz, acquired Grandpa Peter’s share in the elevator. According to Canadian Geographic, Feb./March 1979 issue, page 55, this was the first country elevator in Canada.1 Life in the quiet Mennonite family was bustling with activity and conversation about the proposed move to Saskatchewan. Things had been going well for them. They lived right beside the school where all their children of school age were either attending or had attended. The church where Grandpa Peter was a “Vorsaenger” was the Sommerfeld Mennonite Church, only a few miles north of Neuanlage. Their market place, Gretna, was only three-quarters of a mile to the southwest of their home. They lived on the main thoroughfare of the day, the “Post road,” going from Emerson to Gretna, and beyond. They lived immediately adjacent to Grandpa Peter’s brother David. Grandpa Peter’s children had become friends of with their cousins. Grandpa Peter had the reputation of being an excellent threshing machine operator. In the days when threshing machines were run by making horses go in a circle to drive the threshing machine, it was indeed an art to keep the machine going at an even speed. Apparently people could tell from the sound alone which machine Grandpa Peter was operating. His machine always ran with the right hum to it, no matter how heavy the load put into it. Life was indeed good to them.

By March 1914 the family was ready for their auction sale. Only what they considered absolute necessities were kept and the rest was auctioned off. Grandpa Peter, as an elevator owner, was a good friend of the local railway station agent in Gretna, Grandpa decided to reserve three boxcars and one flat car for moving his possessions to Saskatchewan. The railway had a policy that in the boxcar containing the livestock, one family member could get a free ticket for watching the livestock while en route. The railway agent, at Grandpa’s suggestion, put some livestock in all three box cars so that three sons could get free tickets. And so it was that Grandpa Peter’s three sons, Peter, Dave, and Henry got free tickets to Saskatchewan.

Finally, by mid-April, they were ready to load the boxcars. The main pieces of equipment, as remembered by family members, consisted of a large International tractor, the threshing machine, and a hay tedder. They also took eight horses, four cows, plus heifers, two pigs, and some chickens. The Reo was all alone on the flat car.

Grandma Margaret was busy getting things ready for the family. The trip was to take three or four days, and enough non-perishable food had to be taken for this long train ride. Grandma Margaret boiled most of the hams they had recently smoked, and made an enormous amount of “reeschkje” (roasted bread).

The departure date had been set for April 27, 1914. Many people came and bid the family farewell. The younger boys, Jake and John, sons of Grandpa Peter and Grandma Margaret, who were then ten and eight years old, had been watching all of these farewells, and decided to imitate them with their close friends and cousins. One day, while playing in the hayloft with their cousin neighbours, John and Henry Schellenberg, they decided to say their farewells, even though the trip was days away. Shyly and timidly these boys each gave each other a kiss. When the kissing was over, they thought it was so funny, they rolled around in the hay and laughed at their own farewell behaviour.

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On April 26, in the late afternoon, Grandpa Peter and Grandma Margaret left their home for the last time. Together with their children Maria, Anna, John, Jake, Abe, George, and Henrietta, they went to Gretna to spend the last night with Grandma Margaret’s youngest sister Henrietta, Mr. and Mrs. Peter Friesen. During the evening, Grandpa Peter and Grandma Margaret, together with the Peter Friesens, went to pay a final visit to a Kehler family, another sister of Grandma Margaret, while their daughter Maria was left at Peter Friesen’s to baby sit her six younger brothers and sisters as well as the Peter Friesen’s children. Maria was fourteen at the time. Grandpa Peter and Grandma Margaret’s older children Peter, Aganetha, Friesen’s children. Maria was fourteen at the time. Grandpa Peter and Grandma Margaret’s older children Peter, Aganetha, Margaret, Dave, and Henry, spent the last night with Grandpa Peter’s brother, the David Schellenbergs in Neuanlage.

On April 27 they all met at the train in Gretna for the departure. Many people came to the train to see them off. According to all reports it was a happy occasion. The whole family was excited to leave except for daughter Aganetha who was overcome by tears at the thought of leaving her fiancé behind. The boys Peter, Dave, and Henry, were each given a pillow-case full of “reeschkje” and some cooked ham and water, and they disappeared into their respective boxcars to look after their animals. As there was no passenger car on the train as yet, the rest of the family was asked to get into the caboose at the end of the train.

After a stop in Altona, the train finally arrived in Rosenfeld where one passenger car was added. This one passenger car did not solve all the problems of the crowded caboose. Some Old Colony Mennonites were taking the same train to Swift Current and had already taken all the choice seats, leaving only a small smoking section for the Schellenberg family. This smoking area was sectioned off from the rest of the coach. This would have been ideal had it not been for half a dozen Old Colony youths who were smoking heavily in that section since they were out of sight from their elders. The Schellenberg family settled in and made do in this smoke house, as Grandma Margaret called it.

Relief came soon. At supper time those smoking youths were summoned to eat with the rest of the Old Colony group. When the youths were out eating, Grandpa Peter stationed his children in such a way that there was no room for the youths. When the youths came back after supper and saw their places occupied, they never returned. Now the Schellenbergs had a section to themselves which was much to their liking. The large wood cook stove was close to their section.

The remainder of the three or four day trip was uneventful. Dave and Henry remained in their boxcars and were not seen until they got to Herbert. Peter looked after the cows and chickens, and at certain stops brought milk and eggs to the family to eat. On one such stop he got carried away in a conversation until the train started moving and he had to remain in the passenger coach until the next stop, leaving the cows and chickens unattended. The train stopped at every town between Gretna, Manitoba, and Herbert, Saskatchewan.

Della Schellenberg Winters writes further, “The children had a great time exploring the coulees and were especially impressed with the abundance of buffalo berry bushes. “What a lot of plum trees!” exclaimed John in delight. The Hamm boys roared with laughter. Any idiot should know that plums were the dried up things used for cooking and certainly did not grow on trees in Saskatchewan.”

The beginnings in Saskatchewan were hard, but since everyone was struggling nobody seemed to mind. There was always enough to eat. The first year, 1914, resulted in a crop failure. Only 150 bushels of wheat were harvested. These precious 150 bushels were separated into seed wheat for the next year and the rest was made into flour. There was no money for the $500 payment on the mortgage.

In 1915 there was a bumper crop, but wheat prices were low. Wheat prices went up in 1916 but the crop suffered from rust. During the next 12 years the crops were only fair with bumper crops in 1923, 1927, and 1928. With good management...
Grandpa Peter made his last mortgage payment in 1928 and thus entered the Great Depression debt free.

In 1929 tragedy struck the family. George, the youngest son was caught in a whirlpool while attempting to swim across the Saskatchewan River and drowned. Grandpa Peter was elected to the ministry shortly after they came to Saskatchewan. He built the church there and served it until his death in 1941 at the age of 73. Grandma Margaret died of diabetes in 1935 at the age of 67. They were both buried in the church cemetery near Gouldtown.

Following is a brief summary of the children of Peter and Margaret Schellenberg, as compiled by Menno Hildebrand.

1. Anna - born and died 1890
2. Aganetha - born and died 1891
3. Peter - born 1892, married Katharina Hamm 1914
   had six children with his first wife
   married Katharina Klassen
   had two sons with second wife
   in 1980 lived in the senior citizens home in Herbert
4. Aganetha - born 1894, married John Hildebrand 1914
   moved to Gretna, Manitoba
   raised 12 children
   died in 1961
5. Margaret - born 1895, married widower John Klassen
   with 3 children
   had six more children
   in 1980 lived in Burns Lake, B.C.
6. David - born 1897, remained single
   died 1975
7. Henry - born 1898, married Sarah Hamm
   had 4 children
   died 1965
8. Maria - born 1900, married Isaac Hamm
   had six children
   in 1980 resided in MacGregor, Manitoba
9. Anna - born 1901, remained single
   in 1980 resided in nursing home in Herbert
10. Henrietta - born and died in 1903
11. John - born 1904, married Nettie Wiebe
    had 5 children
    in 1980 resided on farm in Gouldtown
12. Jacob - born 1906, remained single
    died 1979
13. Abram – born 1908, remained single
    in 1980 resided in Gouldtown
14. George – born 1911, drowned in 1929
15. Henrietta – born 1912, married Jacob Funk
    had seven children
    in 1980 resided in Waldeck, SK

Endnotes
1 The elevator built by William Hespeler in Niverville is usually considered the first elevator to be built in Western Canada. Lawrence Klippenstein and Julius G. Toews, eds., Mennonite Memories: Settling in Western Canada (Winnipeg: Centennial Publications, 1977). 25. ed.
First Sermon by Rev. Peter Schellenberg
Sommerfelder Mennonite Church, Saskatchewan, 14 July 1917

This sermon has been translated from German (Gothic Script) by Anne (Hildebrand) Peters, daughter of Aganetha (Schellenberg) and John Hildebrand, and grand-daughter of Peter and Margarita (Unger) Schellenberg of Gouldtown, Saskatchewan, for the occasion of the Schellenberg family reunion in August, 1994.

Translating from German to English is not an easy task because German sentences can be very long. Sometimes I’ve chosen to keep the German sentence structure so as to best capture the original meaning. The poetry was especially difficult. “My beloved souls” is a direct translation of “Meine geliebte Seelen.” Even though the word Seelen refers to people, I chose souls because it seemed more authentic. I chose to use the Good News translation to quote the scriptures Rev. Schellenberg used. This seemed like the best one for our children and grandchildren to understand.

Grandfather and Grandmother lived on a farm near Gouldtown, Saskatchewan, and he was called to the ministry in 1917 at the age of forty-nine. This calling came when the men (Bruderschaft) from his congregation met and everyone submitted the name of the man he would discern for the ministry. Normally, a second round of voting happened between the top two or three candidates. The man with the most votes was asked to take on the position of minister (Lehrer, literally teacher) in that congregation.

Peter Schellenberg had no formal religious training, and as was the custom when ministers were elected in his Gemeinde (church), expressed his inadequacy for his new role. In his years as a minister, Grandfather preached 683 sermons, performed 34 marriages, and 42 funerals. We’re told that in spring when it was too icy for the horses, he walked up to nine miles to church. Near Gouldtown, where he and his wife are buried, the church where he not only preached, but also built the pulpit, the bannisters and the pews are still there.(1995).

Grandfather Schellenberg passed away on July 4, 1941, at the age of seventy-four. In 1940, in his last Christmas letter, he wrote the following to his grandchildren:

“In memory of your grandfather, allow me to write a few lines. The fear of God is the beginning of knowledge. My child, obey the discipline of your father, and leave not the prayers of your mother, because this is like a beautiful ornament on your head, and a necklace around your neck.

Thus written on December 21st, 1940, in my 73rd. year. I was born on March 3rd, 1868 in Russia.”

This is by no means a perfect or even accurate translation, but I believe the message is nevertheless there. Grandfather’s faith and commitment comes through loud and clear.

SERMON
Praise ye!
Praise ye the Lord; Praise ye the name of the Lord; Praise
Moses not be directed to me also when He says in vs. 14, “What about your brother Aaron, the Levite? I know that he can speak well. In fact, he is now coming to meet you and will be glad to see you.” My beloved listeners, what a meaningful answer this is for me also. Have we not a brother, namely Jesus Christ, who will speak for us when we obey His will and follow in His footsteps? God says to Moses, “Behold, he comes forth to meet you and when he sees you, he will be glad in his heart.”

Oh you my beloved who are listening to me, how much more will our Saviour and Redeemer rejoice when those of us who are gathered here go forth to meet Him. He will come to meet us with outstretched arms and say, “Come, yes come, follow Me, I will lead you, and direct you so that you will not miss the way of righteousness; follow me and stray not from the path that I will show you.” Unfortunately our actions are so weak. We often have the will to do good, but too often we fail in the actual fulfilling of this good will. I know this from experience. That is why I often feel like calling out with Isaiah Chapter 6:5, “I am doomed because every word that passes my lips is sinful, and I live among a people whose every word is sinful,” and also vs. 6-8, “Then one of the creatures flew down to me, carrying a burning coal that he had taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. He touched my lips with the burning coal and said, ‘This has touched your lips, and now your guilt is gone, and your sins are forgiven.’ Then I heard the Lord say, ‘Whom shall I send? Who will be our messenger?’”

Because I believed that these words were directed at me also in my present situation, I could resist no longer and said, “Here am I, send me, Oh Lord.” In the Holy name of Jesus, I now begin the work to which I have been called. I pray that it will be a blessing and not a curse. It is the fruit of sin that man has to work by the sweat of his brow, but I will gladly undertake this and when it becomes difficult, I will remind myself how evil our sinfulness is.

Oh Lord, help me because without you I am nothing. May all my work be done in your name; your holy presence will give me encouragement, comfort, and strength to preach the gospel. I give my all to Thee. Lord, break my evil will, so that your will may be done. Give me a steadfast eye in my work so that I might look for the winning of souls more than for my own glory. I pray God that my motive in the work of the vineyard may be a pure one, and when the flesh is restless, may I find peace with Thee. When discouragements take over, I wish to live as a child. In all things give me wisdom and advice when I am to deal with people. Help Lord, that all I do may be done in your Spirit; in gentleness, in humility, and in love—all these Christian virtues. In all the work that I do, and the burdens that I carry, Lord, I ask that you continue to work within and through me, and help that even on earth I might be at one with Thee, until such a time when I am freed of all difficulties and labors in the best of professions; when I will see you, love you, and praise you; and I shall be eternally filled with joy. Amen.

Yes, my beloved congregation, that is my inmost wish and prayer for all of us, and I come to you brothers and sisters with this request: include me in your prayers also. Yes, pray for me as one who is the least of all servants of our great and exalted God, whom I feel, as I said earlier, too weak and imperfect to serve in this very important office, because I need your support, which I must say I have already felt. On the day I was ordained by our beloved bishop, it became obvious how much the church was in need of a teacher (minister). This became evident in the singing of the hymn after the ordination. I found it hard to accept that this song was speaking to, and about, me, but I prayed that the great and almighty God might answer your prayers in one verse of this song which refers to us for the sake of His beloved Son and our Savior. The words are as follows: Gesangbuch number 144 verse 5.

And now, great God on Heaven’s throne
We ask you in your Son’s name,
To this man whom you have sent to us.
Give power and strength from Heaven.

My beloved congregation, be steadfast in prayer, do not forget to pray for your unworthy teachers (ministers), because we are all only weak vessels just like you. But there is power in prayer when we pray humbly and sincerely kneeling at the throne of God.

Therefore, let us pray together that He, namely Jesus Christ, will work in and through us. By our own strength we can do nothing, but God’s strength within us is powerful. Now let us turn to God the Lord in a childlike prayer. [Here everyone knelt to pray silently, their heads and arms on the seat of the pew.] May the Lord hear our weak babble and be merciful to us.

In solid hope and childlike trust we believe that our merciful God, for Christ’s sake through grace, will have heard our weak prayers. So in the comfort of this hope I turn to the words of our text which we find in I Corinthians 9:17 which reads as follows, “If I did my work as a matter of free choice, then I could expect to be paid, but I do it as a matter of duty, because God has entrusted me with this task.” Thus far the words of today’s text.

Prayer
Oh most merciful and loving God, You who have called me to this service. Look mercifully upon us poor vessels. Give us strength and lead us for your Son’s sake, so that we might willingly fulfill our purpose here, and someday reap the rewards. When we fulfill our duties in an unwilling manner, which happens all too often Lord, even then stand by us with the power of the Holy Spirit, so that we will be obedient to your calling and faithfully try to keep up with our duties, as pleases you, so that we might obtain quietness and wholeness in our souls. Amen.

My beloved listeners, Paul tells us in Corinthians that it is a serious matter to accept the call to the ministry. First, we are rewarded when we teach gladly, and second, it is a command to those who are not willing. Therefore, I feel compelled to say with the Psalmist in Psalm 119:33, “Teach me Lord, the meaning of your laws, and I will obey them at all times.” Then it goes on to say in vs. 34-45, “Explain your law to me, and I will obey it; I will keep it with all my heart. Keep me obedient to your commandments, because in them I find happiness. Give me the desire to obey your laws rather than to get rich. Keep me from paying attention to what is worthless; be good to me, as you have promised. Keep your promise to me, your servant, the promise you make to those who obey you. Save me from the insults I fear; how wonderful are your judgments! I want to obey your commands; give me new life, for you are righteous. Show me how much you love me, Lord, and save me according to your promise.
Then I can answer those who insult me, because I trust in your word. Enable me to speak the truth at all times, because my hope is in your judgments. I will always obey your law, forever and ever. I will live in perfect freedom, because I try to obey your teachings.” Vss. 49 & 50, "Remember your promise to me, your servant, it has given me hope. Even in my suffering I was comforted because your promise gave me life.” Vs. 57, “You are all I want, Oh Lord; I promise to obey your laws.” Vs. 105, “Your light is a lamp to guide me and a light for my path,” Vs. 125, “I am your servant, give me understanding, so that I may know your teachings.” Vss. 132 & 133, “Turn to me and have mercy on me as you do on all those who love you. As you have promised, keep me from falling; don’t let me be overcome by evil.” In I Corinthians 4:1 we read, “You should think of us as Christ’s servants, who have been put in charge of God’s secret truths.”

You see, my beloved congregation, these pleading words came from David, a man after God’s own heart. How much more shouldn’t I, a lowly worm, echo the words of this wise king? I become very afraid and anxious, and I cannot understand why I have been chosen for this service, because in my humble opinion, this should have fallen on a much better and more knowledgeable man. But I will not complain; instead, I will follow in the ways of God. Who wants to displease God? Therefore I give myself completely to God that God through Jesus Christ might work through me. Yes, Lord Jesus, you see how weak and troubled I am. How can you use me as one of your ambassadors in your hand - working in me and through me by your Holy will and pleasure? Give me strength to follow you gladly, to fulfill my duties, and one day possibly, to receive a small reward, as today’s text tells us you have promised to those who do it gladly.

And you, my beloved congregation, don’t only place your trust in us weak teachers (minsters). God deserves all the glory. If you have received nourishment for your souls from our sermons, thank God through Jesus Christ that He has used such imperfect instruments to satisfy you. If you have been led to green pastures, to God be the honour and glory for ever.

Now my beloved brothers and sisters, I would like to direct a few words to you, but how? I believe that you know as much, and probably more, than I do. Let me share with you Titus Chapter 2.

But you must teach what agrees with sound doctrine. Instruct the older men to be sober, sensible, and self-controlled; to be sound in their faith, love, and endurance. In the same way instruct the older women who behave as women should who live a holy life. They should not be slanderers or be slaves to wine. They must teach what is good, in order to train the younger women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled and pure, and to be good housewives who submit themselves to their husbands, so that no one will speak evil of the message that comes from God. In the same way urge the young men to be self-controlled. In all things, you yourself must be an example of good behavior. Be sincere and serious in your teaching. Use sound words that cannot be criticized, so that your enemies may be put to shame by not having anything bad to say about us. Servants are to submit themselves to their masters and please them in all things. They must not talk back to them or steal from them. Instead they must show that they are always good and faithful, so as to bring credit to the teaching about God our Savior in all they do. For God has revealed his grace for the salvation of all mankind. That grace instructs us to give up ungodly living and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in this world, as we wait for the blessed day we hope for, when the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ will appear. He gave Himself for us, to rescue us from all wickedness and to make us a pure people who belong to him alone and are eager to do good. Teach these things and use your full authority as you encourage and rebuke your hearers. Let none of them look down on you.

You see my beloved souls, these and similar words have been written for our instruction.

Oh Lord, enlighten us through your Spirit so that we may know when we are not living according to your instructions, and give us power, and strengthen us so that we might resist temptations, and strive harder to do your will, so that when the time comes and we are weighed in the balance, we will not be found wanting.

To you young people, I would like to say a few words - to you who have been sitting and listening, and hopefully understanding how important the work of God is. We are very happy that you have come, but Jesus Christ is happier still. He wants all people to learn the truth and live forever. Take note of what we read in Ephesians 6:1-3, “Children, it is your Christian duty to obey your parents, for this is the right thing to do.” “Respect your father and mother” is the first commandment that has a promise added, “so that all may go well with you, and you may live a long time in the land.” You see, my beloved children, these and many more Scripture verses are directed to you. Do not treat them as empty words, for there are serious truths in these verses.

Of course, it would not occur to parents to be examples to their children by cursing and raging, or even allowing them to take advantage of their fellowmen by lying or cheating. If this happens, that is very sad; then I encourage you to be patient, and take your refuge in Jesus who alone can and will help us to turn from our distress. Only those who persist in goodness will have eternal life.

And now my beloved souls who have been listening so attentively to what God has presented to you through me, what is our position towards the words from 1 John 5:1-5, “Whoever believes that Jesus is the Messiah is a child of God; and whoever loves the father loves his child also. This is how we know that we love God’s children: it is by loving God and obeying his commands. For our love for God means that we obey his commands. And his commands are not too hard for us.” In Matthew 11:30 our beloved Saviour Himself says, “My yolk is easy and my burden is light.” In John 13:35 we read, “If you have love for one another, then everyone will know that you are my disciples.”

Oh my very beloved souls, what a beautiful symbol this is! But I ask you, as whose disciples will you be known? I ask each of you to answer this question for yourself. Especially those of you who day in and day out, yes even year after year, live as enemies, and think that you cannot be reconciled to each other, each one believing that he is the one that’s been wronged. Oh my beloved, it is very hard, in fact it ‘goes against the flesh’ to find fault with ourselves, but I ask you to try it,
because it is very necessary. It is likely that you will find more faults with yourself than what the quarrel originally began with. So make an effort, and if you cannot do it on your own strength, take it to Jesus; He will stand by you and help you because He is love. Because He is love, He gave His life for us on the cross. He wants to help us, but we must believe in Him and follow Him in love. This should be the symbol of His followers, so let us remember to practice love so that we may be known as His disciples. In these sad and serious times, we may well say in these end times, where it seems everything is pointing towards the end, let us apply ourselves diligently and turn to Jesus, and say with the blind person, “Lord Jesus, you son of David, have mercy on us, restore our sight, give us the understanding that we might know and see how low we have fallen.” Oh loving souls, when we approach our Jesus like this, and truly mean it, He will hear us, and heal us of the hurts we have suffered. God does not want death for the sinner, but that every soul be converted and live forever.

I close with 2 Peter 3:11-15 and 17-18, “Since all these things will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people should you be? Your lives should be holy and dedicated to God, as you wait for the Day of God and do your best to make it come soon—the day when the heavens will burn up and be destroyed, and the heavenly bodies will be melted by the heat. But we wait for what God has promised: new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness will be at home. And so, my friends, as you wait for that Day, do your best to be pure and faultless in God’s sight and to be at peace with Him. Look on our Lord’s patience as the opportunity He is giving you to be saved, just as our dear brother Paul wrote to you, using the wisdom that God gave him. But you, my friends, already know this. Be on your guard, then, so that you will not be led away by the errors of lawless people and fall from your safe position. But continue to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the Glory, now and forever! Amen.

Now may the Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with us all. Amen. In Jesus name. Amen.

For any other needs that anyone might have, call on the Lord your God; silently, not only here in this place, but also at home, morning or evening, whenever the need arises; you can call on the Lord day or night. And now would you kneel with me again and turn to God in prayer. [Everyone kneels and prays silently] May the Lord hear our prayers and be merciful to us.

Now for this morning’s service I have nothing more to offer this congregation, except to thank you for your respectful participation in this service and with a request to continue to attend in such large numbers, so that I will know that it is not for my sake, but for God’s glory that you are here.

In closing, let me say, “And now the Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord lift His countenance upon you and give you peace. Amen.” And go in the peace of the Lord.

I pray that we might turn to Him in true humility. May the God of grace help us, through Jesus Christ. Amen.

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Plett Foundation Awards Fellowship

The D.F. Plett Historical Research Foundation Graduate Student Fellowship was awarded this year to Susie Fisher Stoesz. Susie is a doctoral student at the University of Manitoba studying Mennonites and Mental Health in southern Manitoba. Susie has studied at Canadian Mennonite University, The University of Winnipeg and at McMaster University in Hamilton. Susie’s doctoral research will explore how experiences of depression, listlessness, loneliness, isolation, and sadness have shaped Mennonite stories of family and community. Dr. Royden Loewen, Chair in Mennonite Studies will be Susie’s supervisor. The award is given for one year and is renewable.

Detmold Museum

On July 22nd, 2011 the Museum für Russlanddeutsche Kulturgeschichte (Museum for the Cultural History of Germans from Russia) was officially opened in Detmold, Germany. The selection of July 22 as the opening date was to commemorate the 248th anniversary of the Manifest issued by Catherine the Great inviting Germans and other Western Europeans to settle in Russia.

The festivities continued on July 23rd with the event open to the general public and featuring a worship service, and an afternoon children’s concert. On the first day of the opening 150 invited guests were present and on the second day a larger group of about 1000 visitors came to attend the festivities.

The Board of Directors of Mennonite Heritage Village, in Steinbach felt it would be appropriate to send a gift from MHV to the Detmold Museum. While the stories of the two museums have a slightly different focus, there are also common elements, specifically the Russian experience. Board member Rudy Friesen quickly volunteered to personally represent MHV at this official opening and present the gift.

It was decided that the gift should be something that would offer a permanent and visible link between the two museums. A handmade pair of children’s socks was selected as the appropriate gift. The socks were knit by Susanna Neufeld, nee Heinrichs, who was born in 1892 in South Russia, which is today Ukraine. In 1912 she married Gerhard Neufeld, who was murdered by rebel forces in 1920. Susanna Heinrichs Neufeld emigrated to Canada in 1924 and was known to be a talented seamstress.

Senior MHV Curator, Roland Sawatzky, collaborated with the staff at Presenting Art in Steinbach to create an attractive framed display containing one of the socks as well as words of greeting and explanation. This gift was then taken to Detmold by Rudy Friesen and presented to Dr. Katharina Neufeld, the Director of the Detmold Museum, on July 22. The matching sock will be similarly mounted and displayed at MHV to recognize and declare our relationship with this museum in Germany.

Foundation Reprints Old Colony Mennonites in Canada

One of the more popular books compiled by Delbert Plett was the history of the Old Colonists in Canada. The book has been out of print for awhile but the Board of the Delbert Plett Historical Research Foundation decided to reprint the volume. It is available from the Plett Foundation office.

Contact us at h.werner@uwinnipeg.ca or call 204 786 9352.
Each week thousands of people gathered around their radios to hear Gerhard Ens begin his radio broadcast with “goode owent, leewe frind en nobasch, fonn wiet auf, en fonn dijcht ‘bie. Ekj freie me dau wien fonn’doag aun dissen owent auwada toop koom kenne. En dauw wie uns en hälle üwa onse Je’chicht fetale kjenne...” (Good evening dear friends and neighbors from far and near. I am happy that today we can gather and that we can talk a bit about our story). This was Gerhard’s passion - Mennonite history. He was a man who immersed himself in the study of history. He was a voracious reader who not only had a sharp memory but also a keen ability to condense, collate, and organize the information he read with his own thoughts. At his funeral, it was said he was the search engine before Google. Ens had a long career in the church, as teacher at the Mennonite Collegiate Institute, editor of Der Bote, and radio host for his own Low German history program. Gerhard Ens saw each setting as an opportunity to impart not only historical understanding but also a love for Mennonite history.

Gerhard Ens was born on August 4, 1922 as the oldest child of Gerhard Ens (1893-1990) and Helena Sawatzky (1894-1992) in the village of Gnadental, Baratov Colony, Russia. The family immigrated to Canada in 1923 and settled in the village of Reinland, Manitoba where they took up farming. In 1925 the family renovated the machine shed into a temporary home. This machine shed remained their home for the next eleven years. Times were tough starting up a farm as the depression hit in the 1930s and the travel debt for the move to Canada needed to be paid. The farm was a mixed farm with animals and grains. Travel was limited to short excursions to Winkler for supplies and for visits to family members. It was not until his late teens that Gerhard first visited Winnipeg.

At the age of six, Ens started his school career in the one-room, one-teacher, public school in Reinland along with sixty other students in eight grades. Ens finished grade eight and then moved on to grades nine and ten in the nearby village of Gnadenental on the insistence of his father. Here Ens lived with his grandmother and took a great liking to studying. He went on to the Mennonite Collegiate Institute (MCI) in Gretna for grades eleven and twelve. From here Ens went to Normal School in Winnipeg to receive his teacher’s certificate.

The move to Winnipeg proved to be a big cultural shock. “The lifestyle of non-Mennonite students seemed strange to me,” he said. After receiving his teacher’s certificate, his first teaching post was in the village of Gnadenental in 1941, where he once went to school. Then in 1942 Ens received his call for military training. This was a significant point in his life. He applied for conscientious objector status and was successful. However, when the Department of Education found out that Ens had applied for conscientious objector (CO) status they arranged an interview with him and revoked his teaching certificate for fear he would inflict his views on the children. He worked a few weeks on the family farm and then in summer got his assignment to work on the Jack Wurmnest farm near Sperling. At his request he was transferred to work in a mental hospital in Portage la Prairie, where he worked as an orderly along with other COs. The work was not always pleasant but it was necessary. Near the end of his service he began to take correspondence courses through the University of Manitoba and he taught himself to type. It was hard to plan for anything because the term of service was for the duration of the war and no one knew how long that would be. The war ended in 1945 but Ens was not freed from his duties until 1946. Ens later reflected, “… those two years have been really meaningful years of my life. I learned to know another group of people… which has given me a great many insights for later years.... I would recommend this type of alternative service for the future.”

In the 1930s and during the war the Ens family had some contact with people in Russia through letters. Ens believed that communism was evil and that perhaps Germany would bring some relief to the Mennonites and their situation in Russia. However Ens remembers thinking “…how could a civilized nation like Germany fall for a man and a party like Hitler and...
the Nazis? How did the Germans not realize their mistake? How could a people of poets and thinkers become a people of judges and executioners? I identified with German culture and I got this from my father.”

After the war, in 1946, the MCI called Ens to teach at the school. Ens accepted, and because it was a private school, he did not need his teacher’s certificate. While Ens had requested on several occasions to have his certificate reinstated, he decided to try another route. He went to see W.C. Miller, the Minister of Education and the Conservative party MLA for the area. Miller called in the deputy minister and said “I have known this man since he was this high (motioning with his hand showing he knew Ens from a young age). I want him to get his teaching license back. Can’t you fix that up?” After a short interview Ens got his license back.

In 1948 a friend introduced Gerhard to Anni Niebuhr while he was taking summer school in Winnipeg. A courting relationship started and during the school year Ens traveled by bus to Winnipeg to see Anni. The two were married in 1950 and had five children between 1951 and 1961.

At the MCI he taught with his former teachers such as Paul J. Schaefer. Gerhard thought he was there to “help out”, but it turned into a long tenure at the MCI. His teaching load was very heavy at times and he did not always feel academically prepared. Gerhard was interested in Mennonite history and in the early 1950s he was a part of the Mennonischer Historischer Verein which worked at republishing the Woher, Wohin, Mennoniten series by Paul Schaefer. In 1958 this committee became the Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society and Gerhard Ens remained heavily involved by being on the board, which went on to establish the Mennonite Heritage Village Museum in Steinbach in 1964, in time for the 1967 Canadian centennial celebrations.

One of Gerhard’s other interests was the church. He was baptized in 1946 and was given the opportunity to preach in the Blumenorter Mennonite Church, near Gretna. In 1958 he was ordained. Gerhard Ens was also involved with the Conference of Mennonites in Manitoba. As early as 1949 he was a member of the provincial youth organization, Manitoobaer Jugendorganisation, and by 1952 the recording secretary. He became a popular guest speaker in churches, anniversary celebrations and historical events. In 1955 he was elected to the Conference of Mennonites in Manitoba radio committee and in 1956 led a half-hour Sunday German radio program, Frohe Botschaft, on the Christian radio station KFNW in Fargo, North Dakota. This program was later produced by Faith and Life Communications in Winnipeg and after 1974 Ens was one of the regular speakers. He was also commissioned to produce German Sunday School lessons which were widely used in churches.

While at the MCI Gerhard became involved in the Manitoba Mennonite Centennial Committee, which planned celebratory events around the 100th anniversary of Mennonite settlement in Manitoba. In anticipation of this, Gerhard was asked to start a fifteen minute radio broadcast in Low German about Mennonite history. Soon this was increased to half an hour. Ens kept to this task of promoting the Mennonite story on the air in Low German for thirty-four years. It aired from 1972-2006, airing some 1400 programs, on three radio stations, without remuneration. He built up a large following of listeners who would tune in each week to listen. He is known to have teased professional recording engineers that he could produce a radio program with his little tape recorder and microphones while they needed a whole room of equipment.” In 2008 Ens reflected on the Low German language saying “Mennonites of the Low German persuasion have no homeland in Europe they call their home. Low German has become a home where people can move in and out and express themselves”. In 1967 Principal Paul Schaefer retired and the job was offered to Gerhard. He remained principal until 1977. He considered these hard years. His students fondly remember Ens as witty, versatile, and well-prepared. He was a teacher who taught ten different subjects. During his time as principal he oversaw the expansion of the music and sports programs and the shift from German to English instruction. The students knew him as “General”. One former student recounted how Ens would come into history class without any notes or textbook and ask the students where he had left off last class. From there he picked up the subject and carried on.

In 1977 Ens resigned from the MCI and moved to Winnipeg after accepting an invitation to take up the editorship of Der Bote with the editorial office of the paper moving from Saskatoon to Winnipeg. Ens looked forward to more contact with the larger constituency. He saw the mission of Der Bote as facilitating communication among the various groups of Mennonites in North America, South America, and Europe; and to provide a forum for discussion. Ens brought an interest in Mennonite history to the paper with articles on schools and the national conference, for example. Ens later said of his time as the “Bote Onkel”, “…[It was] the most immediately satisfying work I did. It was one of those things where when you finished an issue and put it to bed and mailed it out there was something visible. One had the feeling of having accomplished something.” After a successful career as Der Bote editor, Ens retired in 1991.

Shortly after settling in Winnipeg in 1977, Ens was invited to share his teaching and preaching gifts with the Sargent Avenue Mennonite Church “for the time being.” Ens later remarked that “nothing is as permanent as something that starts for the time being”. He continued this service until 2006.

At an event thanking Ens for his ministry at Sargent Church, fellow minister, Martin Friesen, said of Ens, “[he] has enriched
the life of the congregation as a preacher who made his sermons relevant, a teacher who developed a special bond with his Bible study students, and a historian who made the church’s past come alive”. It was estimated that Ens preached over 2,000 sermons. Another fellow lay minister, Menno Wiebe, recounted how one Sunday Gerhard sat down in the pew and his wife Annie showed him the church bulletin which listed Ens as preaching. Gerhard responded with “was ist geschrieben ist geschrieben!” (What is written is written). He went to the church office, picked up a Bible and took his place at the front of the church. That Sunday he preached a magnificent sermon.

While in Winnipeg, Ens continued his involvement with the Mennonite Village Museum in Steinbach. In 1988 the organization undertook a three million dollar expansion in time for the 1990 Mennonite World Conference to be held in Winnipeg. Ens became president of the board in 1989 and oversaw the elimination of the debt. He resigned as president in 1998. He served on the board for over forty years.

Gerhard Ens’ contributions to the Mennonite community were recognized on a number of occasions. In 2004 he was named past president emeritus of the Mennonite Heritage Village and in 2010 the “Gerhard Ens Gallery” was named in his honor. In 2005 Ens was given an honorary lifetime membership into the Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society. In 2008 he was given the “Award of Excellence” by the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada.

In 2008 Gerhard moved from his home to Donwood Manor Personal Care Home where he received daily visits from his wife and family. The next 4 years were difficult for him. He died on February 13, 2011 at the age of 88, leaving behind his wife, 5 children and their families. He will be missed by many “…dear friends and neighbors from far away and close by”.

Sources

Heritage Posting, No. April 2005 #48, April 2008 #60.
E-mail, Arnold Reimer to Conrad Stoesz, October 19, 2007.
E-mail, CFAM radio station to Conrad Stoesz, October 26, 2007.

Endnotes

1 From the Mennonite Historian, March 2011.
2 Some of these stories have been published: Gerhard Ens, Deesachtene Woneachten enn Kanada enn aundere Jeschijchten, Gerhard J. Ens and Erica Ens, eds., (Edmonton: RTP Archive Press, 2011) (A review is included in this issue. eds.)

Adalbert Goertz (1928-2011)

Edwin Brandt, Minneapolis, Mn.

Adalbert Goertz was born December 3, 1928, on the estate (Domäne) of his father in Langenau, Rosenberg County (Kreis), West Prussia. He was the son of Paul Gerhard Goertz (1887-1945) and Margarete, nee Schukat (1900-1996). He died in Colorado Springs, Colorado, on May 7, 2011. He was certainly a pioneer, since I know of no one else publishing material about Mennonite genealogy as early as 1958.


By the time work on this guide commenced, most of Adalbert’s approximately 250 articles in eight German periodicals...
grew up under a strong Mennonite family influence and was of her loving husband, partner and soulmate, Grant. Judith BC and passed away peacefully on May 24, 2011 in the arms of her beloved dad, Ben and mom, Irene in the family businesses.

Adalbert Goertz with his wife Bärbel (Kittler) in a 2007 photo taken for their church directory. Photo Credit: Adalbert Goertz Family Album, Picasa Web Albums.

Mourning his loss most deeply are his widow, Bärbel, five children, 12 grandchildren, three step-grandchildren, two great-grandchildren, one brother, Johann (Jan), in Thunder Bay, Ontario, and one sister, Ida (Laschütza) in Freiburg im Breisgau, Germany. His mother, born March 31, 1900, in Breisgau, died in Thunder Bay, Ontario, on February 14, 1996. His father and three brothers died in World War II. He himself was drafted into the Home Guard (Heimwehr, specifically Heimat-Flak) at the age of 15, after studying at the Friedrichs-Kollegium in Königsberg, a secondary school (Gymnasium) in 1939-1944. He witnessed the destruction of historic downtown Königsberg by two British air raids in 1944 and was evacuated from the besieged city on February 28, 1945, by boat via Pillau, Gotenhafen (Gdynia) and Swinemünde. He graduated from the Oberschule, another secondary school, in Sankt Peter-Ording in 1950. He studied at Upland College, Upland, California, 1950-1951. Then he attended Goethe University in Frankfurt am Main, where he received his M.Sc. (Diplom) in physics in 1958.

Adalbert married Bärbel Kittler, a native of Danzig, in Neuwied-Torney on August 8, 1958. The family immigrated to Boulder, Colorado, in November 1960. He received his Ph.D. in physics from the University of Colorado in 1968. He taught physics and mathematics in Pennslyvania, but also in South Florida and Jamaica. After retiring the Goertz’s settled in Colorado Springs, Colorado, in November 1997. There they joined the Beth-El Mennonite Church.

Judith Rempel was born September 16, 1952 in Abbotsford, BC and passed away peacefully on May 24, 2011 in the arms of her loving husband, partner and soulmate, Grant. Judith grew up under a strong Mennonite family influence and was fiercely proud of her Mennonite heritage. She worked beside her beloved dad, Ben and mom, Irene in the family businesses as a child and never faint of heart, at eighteen years of age she travelled to Pennsylvania as a volunteer for the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC). From there at age twenty she went to Winnipeg to work for MCC for four years then on to
Judith Rempel receiving the Key Contributor Award at the 2008 Mennonite Historical Society of Alberta Annual General Meeting. Photo Credit: Dave and Marion Toews.

university at Western earning a Masters Degree in Sociology. She worked for Manitoba Health for a time then on to work for the City of Calgary in 1987 as a Research Social Planner. She moved to Calgary Community Priorities in 2000 and then to Recreation in 2005 as a Research Social Planner. Judi was passionate about everything she did; her work at the City, the MCC, her genealogy work, and especially her fabulous and memorable meals. Her highest passion was for exploring. She travelled to every continent on Earth except Antarctica living for a while in Africa. Her passion earned the respect of her professional peers at work and the love of her friends. Judith was the long-time coordinator of the Mennonite Historical Society of Alberta. Not only did she volunteer at the Library and Archives weekly, but she spent endless hours on the website, which she set up, researching history, genealogy, and answering queries and emails, from many places beyond Alberta. The ultimate genealogist, Judith prepared family histories for clients and friends. Adapted from the Calgary Herald.

Reviews

Der frumma Jeronimus Vetter und ondra Tschichtlen by Dora Maendel

(CD produced by Hutterite Brethren Book Centre, 2010)

When I first heard Dora Maendel tell stories in the Hutterite language, I felt a kind of delight, like I had arrived somewhere that was completely familiar to me. The thrill of hearing stories in the language of my birth, my first language, was palpable. It seemed a gift.

I am writing about Dora Maendel’s latest CD entitled Der frumma Jeronimus Vetter und ondra Tschichtlen on which she tells stories in the Hutterite language. This CD is her second after the successful and much loved, Die Olta Marta Basel. The stories are introduced by a tune played simply on harmonica, a tune familiar to Hutterites. Then begins Ms Maendel’s “sofíc” (zaftig) voice telling the story of Jeronimus Vetter. Her voice rises and falls as someone who speaks the language intrinsically; she knows intuitively what should be emphasized and has a delightful turn of phrase which highlights the subtlety of the Hutterite language; naturally, these expressions are very difficult to translate. As examples, I offer the following. One of the characters goes about his business in a, “mir nichts, dir nichts” kind of way. This is a subtle expression of insouciance, a light-hearted unconcern. And then, when some of the characters are fearful and run for their lives, she says, “de hom sich feéis gekauft,” which is a way of saying that they found the capacity to run very fast. But what my translation does not show is that this expression also makes fun of the runner. Finally, she describes a warm, sunny day as, “es is lieb warm gwesen,” i.e. it was endearingly warm. To a speaker of the language this expression highlights just how pleasant this day really was. Hutterites would recognize the language as authentic.

I can imagine the thrill Hutterite children and adults would have in hearing stories in their own mother tongue, as opposed to high German or English for example. There would be an ease of understanding that includes cultural nuances not accessible to the non-Hutterite. This CD brings together culture and language. Understanding these stories in the Hutterite dialect then, is to understand elements of their culture.

Some of the themes found in the stories are universal and some are particularly expressive of the Hutterites’ own values. In der frumma Jeronimus Vetter, for example, there is a celebration of community life. First there is the old man, Jeronimus Vetter living his exemplary Christian life, then young men join him and finally even animals join the community and are expected to work and contribute for the good of all just like everyone else. Other themes include: there is strength in working together (Die Rebhennen); colony life complete with older folks, parents and lots of young ones is wonderful, the best place on earth in Die Rebhannen und Fetzlpuppelen und Hosenhind; work must be done and before play at that in Fetzlpuppelen.
The music, although charming, does not connect with the stories thematically. However, it strikes me that the harmonica is an appropriate instrument to provide the music. The Hutterites have traditionally not played instruments, the voice being the instrument used in singing. Yet, there seemed always to be harmonicas around and these came to be played in a particular Hutterite style. My father played harmonica and when I hear the music on the CD. I recognize it as having that same style.

The stories, although taken from common fairy tales except for Fetzlpuppelen und Hosenhind which Ms Maendle wrote, are well chosen. They are interesting to listen to and convey principles that Hutterites value. But first and foremost, the stories are captivating and entertaining.

Hannah Hofer Friesen

Hannah Hofer Friesen was born a Hutterite. She is an educator and writer by profession and lives in Nelson, B.C. with her husband P. Ralph Friesen. She loves to tell stories to her children and grandchildren.

Himmelbleiw: Manitoba Mennonite Heritage Furniture and Floor Patterns,

Neuberghal Mennonite Street Village, Manitoba, Canada,
Catalogue of Exhibition June 27-October 11, 2010;

Terry Klippenstein, photographer,
introduction to the catalogue written by Margruite Krahn, Ron and Sandi Mielitz.

This attractive, full color exhibition catalogue (36 pages, 53 color photographs of home furnishings accompanied by short descriptive texts) documents the exhibition “Himmelbleiw: Manitoba Mennonite Heritage Furniture and Floor Patterns,” organized by the Neuberghal Heritage Foundation in the Friesen Housebarn Interpretive Center in Neuberghal, Manitoba. It should be noted that the “street-village” of Neuberghal is a Canadian National Historic Site. The exhibition's purpose is stated as twofold: “to celebrate the unique and colorful tradition of Manitoba Mennonite applied arts and to make Manitobans more aware of the importance of their rich heritage” - and, note the following admonition: “encouraging them to save their architecture and artifacts, preserve them in their original condition … and document their provenance.” The selection criteria for the furnishings included in the exhibition are described as “handmade objects indicative of Manitoba Mennonite style and constructions, and interesting story of history attached, exceptional workmanship of artistic merit.” Artifacts in the exhibition were lent by the Mennonite Historical Village at Steinbach, Manitoba and ten private owners, while funding was obtained from the D.F. Plett Historical Research Foundation and the Province of Manitoba through the Heritage Grants Program of the Ministry of Culture, Heritage and Tourism.

The introduction to the catalogue offers a brief summary of the history of Manitoba or “Russian” Mennonites and then introduces the major furniture types shown in the exhibition. Each one, with the exception of the cradle, is featured with its Low German name first, followed by the High German and English translation as well as its placement and function in the home setting. These are trunks and chests, benches and beds, tables and chairs — (although the authors allow that there “is no traditional form of Mennonite chair”-, cradles, cupboards, hanging wall clocks (two Kroeger clocks, 1798 and 1835 respectively and sadly over-painted, and a Mandtler clock of 1865 with its original clock face intact). In addition the catalogue includes gender specific toys such as doll cradles, a rocking horse and a wooden toy threshing machine, hand-made figurative cookie cutters of recycled tin and wood, and finally six out of a total of 15 floor patterns documented to date to have been painted by Mennonite women in the first four decades of the 20th century. To my knowledge, this is the first time that such painted designs to decorate the plain wooden floors of a housebarn home have been published. This alone constitutes a major contribution on the part of the exhibit organizers to the expansion of our understanding of Russian Mennonite aesthetics. Painted floor cloths on cotton canvas are also mentioned as part of the exhibition, but only one is illustrated (however without explanatory text), on the front cover of the exhibition catalogue. Another especially noteworthy furnishing, very plain indeed, is what the authors call a coffin bench, testimony to the preparation of the dead and viewing of the body in the parlor or Groote Stow of Mennonite homes. Particularly compelling is a photograph of a worship meeting set-up in the barn of the Friesen housebarn Interpretive Center where the exhibition was held: a lectern for a sermon book or a Bible is placed on a simple writing table that has been moved temporarily from the house, facing several rows of plain backless benches.

Why the poetic exhibition title Himmelsbleiw? This Low German word translates to either “sky blue” or, according to the authors’ translation, as “heavenly blue”, a color they say was “used to paint walls and decorate furniture that expresses joy and hope.” This assertion is however not substantiated by evidence. Only one handmade chair in the exhibition is painted this light blue color (the typical porch ceiling blue), which was however not the chair’s original color, and only one painted floor pattern is executed in blue while all others have a strong yellow-ochre color base. On the contrary, most pieces of furniture in this publication feature solid dark reds or
yellow ochre, often but not always with contrasting trim, and pieces that were re-painted in the 1920’s and 1930’s tend to be in creamy whites. There is one corner cabinet featured that has very fine grain painting and in general is of superb proportion and craftsmanship. It was most likely brought by its Russian Mennonite owners from their first home in Kansas to Manitoba.

The intended audience of this publication is a broad inter-

sectional event or momentous happenings. All of the stories are written from the perspective of a child or a teenager. To people from a rural Low German world they are like a sip of the fountain of youth. In spite of the youthful perspective they are “still able to convey the sorrow and pathos of adult life” (p. 12).

The Christmas stories deal with a variety of immigrant experiences in 1875, the 1920s, 1948, and in 1975. The themes relate to separation, loneliness, alienation and restoration. Another story deals with Christmas during the war and struggles with questions of war and peace. Two brothers chose different paths, one the military and the other conscientious objection. In “Wiehnachten unja Vefolgung” the issues relate to steadfastness and compromise in the face of state pressure. The story “Wiehnachten enne Depression” is a variation on the story of the prodigal son.

The Christmas context enabled Ens to impart a moral lesson in each story. People err and find themselves again. Brokenness in human relations is repaired. In other stories, sin is recognized and repented of. In most cases the stories are interesting and compelling.

Gerhard Ens clearly has mastery of Mennonite Low German. Most readers will, however find some words to challenge them—words they may have never used in conversation or perhaps never even heard. A few examples are “semledad” (p.119) (reflected, meditated), “plärtrich” (p. 64) (shabby, sploty), “Mollistemml” (p. 105) (voice in minor key), and “Gnusa” (p. 38) (runt). Ens also has some other terms that he renders nicely in Low German, such as “bedingungslose Erjäwung” (p. 116) (unconditional surrender).

There are instances where Ens uses German or English words when a Low German word was available. In the world the reviewer grew up in we would have said “Zuchtjätel” not “Lokomotiv”. For a clock pendulum generally people would have said “Paupeldikja” not “Perpendickel” (p. 77).

Somewhat more bothersome were those cases where typographical or transcription errors occurred. “Sennen” is rendered as “seenen” (p. 12), “Schniedkaunt” as “Schmiedkaunt” (p. 68), and “scheddren” as “schedden” (p. 53). In addition at least one historical error has crept into the introduction. Surely Baratov was a daughter colony of Chortitza, not of Molotschna as stated on page twelve. These details aside we owe a debt to the editors for transcribing and publishing these stories.

These stories give a unique overview of the first hundred years of the Russian Mennonites in Canada. All the different experiences come together in the common bond of language—whether in Canada, Russia, Mexico, or Paraguay, Low German becomes a critical unifier. In the words of another writer, it becomes their only true “Heimat.” In the words of the editors, “whatever literary (or) historical… qualities these stories possess, the Low German idiom is crucial to them” (p. 8).

The moral component of the stories is better illustrated than described. When confronted by a miserable neighbour who needed help the villagers needed the advice of Oom Isaak Ditj:


Jake E. Peters, Winnipeg.

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Readers of this penetrating study will soon note that the faith and culture struggles examined in this volume bear a striking similarity to challenges facing the Mennonite community today. How do supporters of the peace position respond when their values and their society are confronted by foreign foes?

Jantzen examines the tensions within Prussian society as a series of successful wars eventually culminated in a triumphant Germany. During this century, the peace position came under ever more determined attack. Local officials urged Mennonite churches to identify more fully with the new, progressive state. Eventually, prominent Mennonite leaders called for full identification with a state that in numerous ways was emerging as a European leader in social and progressive reform.

Extensive examination of primary sources, such as local church records, correspondence with religious and civic leaders, economic statistics, and literary portrayals provides a rich basis for an analysis of a century of dramatic transformation as the Mennonite community struggled to bridge the gap between distinctive beliefs and dominant societal practices. But, as Janzen demonstrates, the extent of identification with dominant values and practices in society was seen differently by various leaders.

For a full century some champions of accommodation argued that the emerging new order in Germany reflected so many positive opportunities that abandoning the traditional peace position need not impinge on other expressions of faith such as believers’ baptism, freedom in church policies, help for the needy, or missions outreach. Prominent leaders such as Pastor Jacob Mannhardt, or Wilhelm Mannhardt, who contended that basic Christian virtues supported by official policy presented an obligato for Christians, identified more fully with the state, including its military policies.

Sharp divisions arose within Mennonite communities. State policy restricted Mennonite economic opportunities by prohibiting further land acquisition unless some accommodation was made to government military demands. Frederick II permitted some elastic interpretations of official land acquisition policy, but when his successor became more restrictive, the 1780s saw the beginning of emigration to Russia. A century later, when both Prussia and Russia tightened military demands, and Mennonites in Prussia became increasingly supportive of adopting official military demands, another exodus began; this time, the destination was America.

The Mennonite dilemma was also portrayed in society at large. The playwright Ernst von Wildenbruch, with his play Der Mennonit, presented a scathing attack on Mennonites for their refusal to bear arms, and to defend a land that had been welcoming and generous. Mennonite leaders tried to ban the play from the Royal Theater in Berlin, but Emperor Frederick III refused to approve the request. Jantzen compares this confrontation with the state over the play, to the nationally divisive Kulturkampf going on in Germany at that time. Then, in a fascinating examination of Theodor Fontane’s criticism of German militarism at this time, Jantzen rejects the dismissive views of prominent historians who suggested Fontane was living in a dream world.

Jantzen also notes that official Prussian policy toward the Mennonites lacked coherence. Some officials tried to stop Mennonite emigration; others welcomed the loss of “disloyal” citizens. Local officials sometimes argued that losing taxpayers was more important than losing soldiers. At other times, would-be emigrants were forcibly stopped and interrogated.

On another front, the Mennonite community faced challenges on the question of relating to other churches. While state policy prohibited Mennonite acceptance into membership of those who came from the Lutheran or Catholic churches, leaders such as Elder Heinrich Donner (Orloffefelde) contended that royal pronouncements of “freedom of conscience” protected those who wished to join a Mennonite congregation. When this position was challenged, Donner lamented “Our religious freedom has been stolen.”

Jantzen also examines Mennonite views in western parts of Prussia, such as the region around Krefeld, and concludes they were markedly different from those in the eastern area of Prussia. Mennonites in the west were more open to mixed marriages, to inter-confessional cooperation in missions, and to the relaxing of denominational barriers. Also, by the time of the end of the Napoleonic era, participation in the military was largely left to the discretion of the individual; most Mennonites in the region no longer made an issue of this question.

Readers will be pleased to note the use of a wide range of published sources as well as a rich selection of archival documents. In the latter category numerous unpublished records enrich the study. One of these is Heinrich Donner’s Chronik, depicting life in his congregation, the larger Mennonite community and indeed the larger society. Perhaps an enterprising reader will enrich our understanding of an outstanding Mennonite leader by translating and publishing this document.

Peter J. Klassen
Professor Emeritus of History
California State University, Fresno
Stoesz’s history of the Chortitzer Mennonite Church is a concise telling of an important East Reserve Mennonite story. The Chortitzer Church evolved as the Manitoba East Reserve version of the religious identities that emanated from the migration of the Bergthal Colony of Russia to Manitoba in the 1870s. The book is a slightly edited version of Stoesz’s 1987 Masters thesis, although the lapse in time between when it was written and when it was published is hardly noticeable, thanks to the updating of footnotes and the bibliography by the editorial committee.

Stoesz divides his story into chapters that examine the Chortitzer Church from the point of geography: its boundaries, meeting places, and relationships with other areas; its leaders, its relationship to local, provincial and national politics, its economic institutions such as the Waisanamt, its involvement with educational controversies, and its theological orientation.

Looking through the lens of the Chortitzer Church we get a new look at East Reserve history. Most interesting is the Chortitzer Church’s resistance to public schools, which is tempered by their much easier acceptance of municipal government. On the West Reserve municipal government also proved to be divisive for Old Colony Mennonites. Stoesz explains that the “smooth transition to municipal government was aided by the assumption that the municipal boundaries were the same as the borders of the Reserve” (p.56). On the other hand, although the Kleine Gemeinde avoided participation in the municipality, they embraced the public school system. The Chortitzer were much more cautious and after accepting public funding, withdrew from the public school system as early as 1881.

Stoesz’s main point in the book is show how the Chortitzer Church moved from being an ethnic group to a denomination. The argument is pursued in a narrative, highly readable—almost leisurely format. Nevertheless, Stoesz’s history does paint a clear picture of how the Chortitzer Church found a place on the progressive-conservative spectrum between the more austere conservatism of the Old Colony and the more evangelical, progressive and education oriented Berghalcher of the West Reserve.

There are places where the reader might well like to hear more. The ‘sin’ that is attributed to be the cause of Gerhard Wiebe’s resignation from the position of Ältester, while not ignored, is really not explored in terms of how it reverberated through the church. It is also not clear why he continued to be revered by church leaders and presumably others. The book does a good job of explaining the Waisanamt’s role in the transplantation of the community, but other than a few casual references it remains unclear whether the Brandordnung also contributed to or hindered the Chortitzer’s evolution to a denomination. Finally the characterization of the Chortitzer Church’s path as one beginning as an ethnic group to a denomination seems to be based on some fuzzy assumptions. Did the Bergthal Colony people constitute an ethnic identity separate from other Mennonites, and does it mean that when they could be called a denomination that the vestiges of ethnic identity disappeared?

A History of the Chortitzer Mennonite Church is a welcome addition to our understanding of the dynamics of economics, politics and the church during the difficult years of establishing the community in a new land. In particular the view of the East Reserve that we get from looking at it through the eyes of the Chortitzer Church is refreshing and interesting.

Hans Werner
Winnipeg
Dear Editors;

The most recent issue of *Preservings* (#30) again has valuable material. However, I was surprised by the comment on page 75 about Sommerfelder and Old Colony funerals. The writer says that in these groups, “the church was not normally used for viewing, ...the body was considered a polluting force for such a public place of worship, and would not be brought inside.”

My experience relates to the Old Colony church of the Hague-Osler area in Saskatchewan. Those words may reflect how things were before the migration to Mexico in the 1920s. However after that time more funerals were held in the churches and the coffin was open, in front of the congregation, during the service. If a death occurred in the winter in an area where driving was difficult, funerals were still held in homes.

One other needed correction relates to the *Preservings* Issue #29. It says, on page 11, that I.P. Friesen became a minister in the *Rudnerweide* church. That is not so. He was and remained a minister in the *Rosenorter* church which became part of the General Conference. Admittedly, his preaching is generally seen as a primary contributing factor in the emergence of the *Rudnerweide* church but he never became a member of that church.

Abram G Janzen  
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**Our Cover**  
Our cover is a photograph taken by Kennert Giesbrecht while he and Wilfried Klassen were on an adventure trip driving a jeep from Manitoba to Paraguay. The photo is taken at the La Batea Colony in Zacatecus, Mexico.

You Can Read Preservings Anywhere!

Dan Sherling of Lloydminster, Alberta enjoys reading a back copy of Preservings while on holidays at Candle Lake, Saskatchewan. Photo Credit: Leonard Doell.

A German Language Preservings?

The Plett Foundation would like to consider publishing a German version of Preservings particularly for our readers south of the Rio Grande.

If you are interested in translation and editing for such an endeavor on a volunteer basis, please contact:

Hans Werner, Executive Director
at
plettfoundation@gmail.com.

or

Phone (204) 786.9352