In this Issue

‘Gardens, kitchens, recipes and remedies’ is the phrase that has guided our collection of articles in this issue. We do not often reflect on the story of the place of food, gardens, flowers, and cures in our past, even have and continue to represent important parts of everyday life. The stories of remedies in this issue begin with the collaboration of Conrad Stoesz, Archivist, and Paul Dyck, English Professor. Their article focusses on a book in the library of the midwife, Katherine Thiessen. We learn about the intricacies of conveying the knowledge of healing powers possessed by a variety of plants. A short vignette about an instrument, the Life Awakener, whose irritations in one part of the body were believed to drive out pain and even illness in another, and the somewhat comical prescriptions for various maladies found by Ralph Friesen in his grandfather’s diaries offer us further windows into a time when medical science did not claim dominion over the knowledge of what to do when we did not feel quite right.

Our foray into gardens, foods and recipes is rich in its diversity. We have articles about the Mennonite gardens of Manitoba, the intersection of gender and flowers and other decorative plants, and a reflective look at the role of gardens in Bolivia. Along with a photo essay on gardens in two very different landscapes, the Russian Empire and Paraguay, these articles suggest the both the emotional and practical dimensions of the Mennonite garden. Like the garden, the food we eat has both aesthetic and practical dimensions. Food is something we engage with daily and is an intensely cultural and ethnic experience that is constantly evolving. Karen Hursh Graber’s blog offers a glimpse from an outsider into the cross-cultural movement of ingredients and food in Mexico. An translated excerpt from Arnold Dyck’s writings allows us into the Russian Mennonite ritual of the fall pig killing bee. Daphne Thiessen’s essay, given as a talk at the EastMenn lectures in Steinbach, Mb is more reflective, challenging us to think in new ways about the meaning of faith and food. Finally, in a subsection, we have collected a series of short articles and blogs from the internet that in some way remind us of the importance of food in the sustaining of much more than our bodies.

In addition to our feature section we have an explanation by Rebecca Janzen of a complex land conflict in Mexico where ideas and structures (ejidos) meant to redistribute land to peasants in Mexico collides with the Mennonite migration to Mexico and the eventual expansion of Mennonite colonies. Ernie Braun has kindly allowed us to publish his talk from the EastMenn lectures on the Waisanamt. Our book review section is somewhat shorter than usual—it seems that fewer books reached our desks. Please do send us books or information about books that you would like to see reviewed.

O ur Cover brings to life the theme of the feature articles in this issue. The Mennonite Heritage Village has a wonderful garden, faithfully planted and maintained by volunteers. The great image of a tomato reminds us of the goodness of the garden. Mennonite Queso, or cheese gives nod to a food that escapes its own image of a tomato reminds us of the goodness of the garden. It is edited by: Hans Werner, 1.204.786.9352, plettfoundation@gmail.com.
With this issue of *Preservings* my involvement as editor of the magazine comes to an end. I will be retiring from both my roles—that of editor of *Preservings* and as the Executive Director of the D.F. Plett Historical Research Foundation at the end of June 2018. I will also be retiring from my position in the History Department at the University of Winnipeg at the same time. Indeed, it seems all good things must come to an end. The arrival at a milestone invariably results in some reflections on the history project that I have been part of for the last ten or eleven years.

I teach a course in the Fall 2017 semester at the University of Winnipeg that is a survey of Mennonite history beginning with the Radical Reformation—those reformers in 1525 who decided that Luther had not gone far enough, that the church should be made up of believers who had come to membership as adults and were aware of what they were doing and understood what they believed. The last lecture before I write this reflection was on that remarkable period in the Dutch Mennonite experience during a time known as the Golden Age. Mennonites became wealthy, respected, and learned. Earlier restrictions, while gradually disappearing had left them with the legacy of being merchants, clothmakers, doctors and lawyers. The Dutch church entered a period of decline beginning in the 1690s that would result in the disappearance of churches and a reduction in those calling themselves Doopsgezinde from 160,000 in 1700 to 28,000 a hundred years later. One observer in 1743 noted Mennonite wealth, their love of pomp, and their vanity was exceeded by no other group. Historians have suggested that Mennonites’ casting their lot with the world and its possibilities for wealth was their downfall. Although the axiom that history repeats itself is certainly not usually the case, it is difficult not to draw parallels with the Mennonite landscape in North America today. Are Mennonites not generally accepted by North American society, have they not, for the most part, abandoned the idea of being separate from the world? Have there not been great losses of those who were former Mennonites to Christian belief systems that are more acceptable in society, be it in the Anglican and United Churches, or the big box churches of North American Evangelicalism? Like the Dutch church of the 18th century, which was heavily influenced by the theological fashions of its day, those who remain Mennonites have certainly performed theological gymnastics to adapt Mennonite belief to what may very well be viewed in the future as the fashions of our day.

The mandate of the D.F. Plett Historical Research Foundation is to preserve and tell the story of the Mennonites who came to Manitoba in the 1870s, those of their forbears and their ancestors. In particular, we have a ‘heart’ for the Low German people, often the more conservative descendants of these migrants. It has been my privilege over the last ten or so years to visit with and get to know many of them in places ranging from La Crete in northern Alberta to the Bolivian Oriente east of Santa Cruz.

The story of Mennonites who have chosen to live separate from the world is mostly not one many Mennonites find worthy of telling. It is easy to focus on the weaknesses of the present and recent pasts; the times and places where their community structures, rituals and systems fail them. There are notable and difficult stories of failure, the rapes in Bolivia, the recurring stories of Low German Mennonites involved in the drug trade, and the realities of endemic abuse, stand out as tragic and painful stories that the rest of the Mennonite world recoils at in shock and embarrassment. Many, maybe most Mennonites, are content to relegate them to margins and to use their historical trajectories, their points of divergence from the rest of Mennonites, as adequate explanation for their failures. They are, however, on a different path, one that actively seeks to remain separate from the world. It forces upon them arbitrary choices about what aspects of the modern world they out of necessity have to incorporate, forces compromises upon them that defy logic, and has resulted in a retreat into some of the most inhospitable and unlikely frontiers.

When we mention the word ‘history’ we think of the past, not surprisingly. However, doing history also means we tell stories in a certain way, using the past as one of the ways we might understand our present. In fact, the way we tell the stories of the past is always shaped by the questions and sensibilities of the present. It would be worthy of the heritage we share to actively engage with the full gamut of our Mennonite histories. The Dutch story points to the dangers of losing our bearings, of either giving up the past as unusable for our present, or for reworking it to such an extent that it becomes unrecognizable. The story we have pursued over the last number of years in these pages is also a necessary corrective. Being rooted in a culture that disparages inquiry and education, holding on to only the ways things have been done is no guarantee of faithful- ness or survival. Our histories should not be left only to those of a nostalgic bent, or those who want to stubbornly live in and relish a glorious past. I should also not become a weapon to disparage those among us who choose different paths. The history of ‘our peoples’ is not only about the past, it is also about our present and ultimately our futures.

**Ralph Friesen Retires**

At its April, 2017 Board meetings, the Foundation celebrated the contribution of Ralph Friesen, for whom the meetings marked the end of his involvement on the Board. Ralph has served almost since the Foundation’s beginnings and has been a valued member around the table. Ralph has been, and hopefully will continue to be a faithful contributor to *Preservings*. He sometimes bemoaned the fact that he was not as familiar with the conservative Mennonites as he thought he should be, but his contribution was always thoughtful and his gentle guidance will be missed.

Hans Werner, editor

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In the Garden of the Book: 
The 1551 *Kreuter Buch* in Katharina Thiessen’s Library

By Paul Dyck and Conrad Stoesz, Winnipeg, Manitoba

**Introduction**

This past year (2016), the Mennonite Heritage Archives in Winnipeg received the donation of a book that had belonged to Mennonite midwife Katharina Thiessen; this donation complemented other artifacts and books of hers already in the collection. Remarkably, this book is a very early German herbal, or book of healing plants, the 1551 *Kreuter Buch* of Hieronymous Bock, with woodcuts by David Kandel. This book was a pioneering work of practical botany. It, like other herbals of its time, was designed to catalogue plants, naming and describing them so that readers could identify them, and more than that, use them in remedies for a broad range of common illnesses. As such, the book takes us straight into the life of sixteenth-century Germany, and particularly the new science and its bodily applications. But more than that, this book and its accompanying artifacts, takes us into the life of Mennonite colonies from Chortitza (where the book was acquired by 1833), to Southern Manitoba, where it continued to be a resource for the grassroots medicine practiced by Katharina Thiessen. One of the interesting questions is what exact role it played for her, given that we also have a number of her prescription slips: she prescribed drugs in a very modern way (this also sheds some light on why the College of Physicians and Surgeons, to which she did not belong, felt threatened by her, which we discuss later), seemingly moving freely across our present boundary between folk remedy and medicine proper. The book as a whole strongly suggests a way of seeing the natural world as holding resources for human health, and that the healer must be intimately familiar with plant life in order to be effective. This larger philosophical outlook might be seen to be borne...
out in the way that Thiessen and other midwives shared recipes with other communities, including Indigenous ones, learning what the plants of the Canadian prairies offered for healing. In this Mennonite context, the *Kreuter Buch* becomes more than a historical oddity or marker of early science, but itself testifies to earlier (but surprisingly recent) ways of thinking about the natural world and health. Today neither doctors nor pharmacists work directly with plants, but the connections between plants and the human body remain fundamental to our health practices. Even today, unaltered plant materials still make up a significant proportion of the active ingredients in modern medical drugs.1

The Book in its Mennonite Context

Katharina had a considerable number of medical resources that she could draw upon—likely more than most.2 Her medical library ranged from the *Kreuter Buch* to books current at the time of her practice in the 1890s. David Loewen (1796-1865) was made aware of the book though his friend Peter Hahn.3 Loewen bought the book for twelve rubles and fifty kopeks from Jacob Wiebe of Neuendorf, Chortitza colony. Loewen was a healer educated in Prussia who took on apprentices such as his daughter Justina Loewen (1826-1905), (later Justina Bergen and Justina Neufeld) and possibly Katharina Thiessen.

Bock’s *Kreuter Buch* may seem at first to be a historical oddity, out-of-place in a modern medical practice. For one, we now think of it as a rare book, belonging in an archive. But as the inscription at the front of the book shows, in the 19th century it was regarded as a rich resource, for practical use.

Significantly, as the book changed hands in 1833, its new owner, David Loewen, regarded it as a medical resource and as a blessing from God. The immediate connection of natural healing properties of plants and God’s kingdom of grace is particularly striking; the book was not merely scientific or medical, but fit into a larger understanding of God and the world that its author would have largely shared. Even across the four centuries between its writing by Bock and its use by Thiessen, there is a continuity of thought. While they lived in different times and circumstances, Bock and Thiessen can be seen to have shared some key commitments. First, they focused on practical healing. Second, they tested and used knowledge from a variety of sources. Third, they both showed a healthy respect for, and also a skepticism toward medical authority, or better put, a willingness to learn from authority, but not to venerate it.

Katharina Thiessen was one of the best-known midwives in the Mennonite community of Southern Manitoba. For many Mennonites she was famous, delivering hundreds of babies and tending to a wide variety of ailments of man, woman, and child. She was infamous to some outside the Mennonite community who sought economic gain as doctors in the Rural Municipality of Rhineland. The lobbying efforts of the doctors garnered results in 1895, when she was charged for practicing without a having a license issued by the Manitoba College of Physicians and Surgeons. The College was made of Anglo-Canadian, formally-trained men who usually had little use for immigrant, female, midwives with no formal training. The Mennonite community was appalled at the decision and came to her aid by pressing their MLA, Valentine Winkler into action. Winkler not only paid her fine but threatened he would introduce legislation to allow midwives to practice even if they had no license. Fearing this legislation would jeopardize the medicalization of health care in the province, the College backed down and no more midwives were prosecuted.4

Thiessen lived and worked in a time still grappling with the two major shifts in the development of modern understandings of the body: the vitalism to mechanism shift, and the humorism to modern physiology shift. Vitalism—the notion that life comes from an indwelling vital spirit—was replaced by a mechanical understanding of the body, while humorism—the notion that four substances or humors made up the body and everything else—was replaced by a much more complex physiology. Her library reflects these shifts, as it contains both the *Kreuter Buch* and the 1878 *Lehrbuch der Geburtshilfe für die Preußischen Hebammen* (Textbook of Obstetrics for Prussian...
Midwives had a sacred place within Mennonite society. Midwives often felt there was divine leading in their becoming a midwife and they became holders of specialized and important knowledge that had the power to heal and the power between life and death. Midwives’ services were often called upon throughout the Mennonite community and beyond and therefore they travelled more than the average woman. Many midwives, including Thiessen, provided overall health care for the community, not only helping women give birth, but also had access to wisdom from past generations through her apprenticeship and texts such as the Kreuter Buch. Mary Ginter (Mary Friesen, Mary Hildebrand) remembers her grandmother, Katharina Thiessen (daughter-in-law to midwife Katharina Thiessen) using the Kreuter Buch when she had laryngitis. There was a specific page she would thumb too, read the recipe, administer the noted medicine and in no time she was better. Good midwives were by nature practical people who looked for ways to improve the care they provided. Some were avid cultivators and collectors of healing plants, while others took opportunities to learn and exchange knowledge with other midwives and healers of various traditions and backgrounds. The Chortitzer Mennonite church on the Mennonite East Reserve recognized the important role midwives played and agreed to provide training to new midwives in 1892.

Midwives had a sacred place within Mennonite society. Midwives often felt there was divine leading in their becoming a midwife and they became holders of specialized and important knowledge that had the power to heal and the power between life and death. Midwives’ services were often called upon throughout the Mennonite community and beyond and therefore they travelled more than the average woman. Many midwives, including Thiessen, provided overall health care for the community, not only helping women give birth. These community health care practitioners were essential to the well-being of the community.

The Book in its Original Context

Not surprisingly, in today’s medical practice doctors do not work directly with plants. It may come as a surprise, though, that this was also the case in the early 16th century, and Bock’s book and other herbals of its time were meant to change this practice. Doctors at the time relied on “herb women” for their plant materials, and herbals were meant to systematize classical and folk knowledge and to put practitioners in direct contact with natural healing substances. It should also be noted that medicine was not professionalized then as it is now, and that clergy were expected to administer basic medicine. The English minister George Herbert recommended in the early 17th century that every parson should own a herbal to this end. Within Germany, Bock’s book sold very well. Not only was it written in vernacular German (consequently giving us a snapshot of the language of the time), but it focused on German plants, giving unprecedented, precise descriptions of the plants in their various stages of growth and their exact habitats. It also carefully explained the medicinal uses of each plant, with recipes for the various medicines.

Bock’s book includes 430 plants (200 herbs, 150 shrubs, and 80 trees), and for each plant it provides a woodcut illustration and a detailed textual account, summarizing its effects and precisely describing its appearance and habitat before accounting for its name, which draws upon the classical identification of the plant, and finally offering an explanation of its healing properties, along with instructions or recipes for medicinal applications. These entries make up the bulk of the work, but accompanying them are three important tools: an index of plant names in Latin, an index of plant names in German, and an index of illnesses. Each one directs the reader into the book’s particulars, while also laying out the scope of the whole. These three indexes say a lot about the nature of the herbal itself: the Latin index provides a kind of universal key, linking this work both to the classical tradition and to pan-European botanical work; the German index captures local knowledge in a direct and useful way; and the list of illnesses puts into action the book’s most essential purpose, the application of plants to human health.
time meant primarily ancient Greek and Latin texts) describes it as a means of drawing a cold from the head. Among other sources, Bock cites the poet Quintus Serenus Sammonicus (d. 212) and a primary author of the herbal tradition, Pedanius Dioscorides (c. 40-90 A.D.). Under “Von der kraft und wüerkung” (its power and effect), Bock chiefly identifies the herb by its humoral characteristics: it is hot and (presumably) dry, and so it should be used for all cold, damp ailments. This includes both internal (mixed in wine, it loosens phlegm) and external uses. “The ground-up root mixed with oil and used as a salve promotes perspiration, expands the blood vessels and all cold parts of the body, especially parts that in a fever got too cold or else were frozen.”13 The latter includes the statement that since Bertram is a tooth-root, it is good for treating toothache. This seems to draw upon the doctrine of signatures, which states that herbs cure the body parts that they resemble. In addition to chewing, the herb could be made into a salve and rubbed on the back or other cold parts of the body.

Bock may have lacked funds for an illustrator, but to enter into Bock’s project we need, for a moment, to step away from current assumptions about images and truth. For us the image naturally bears the status of documentary evidence, the picture of the rose, for instance, shows us the rose as it really is. We see the object and the objective reality; we observe first-hand what the artist or the photographer has observed. If we think about the sixteenth century there are, however, two factors that complicate this assumption. Firstly, the technology of print was in its infancy. Historically, not all herbals were illustrated. And in the age of manuscript, plant illustrations were made by copying. Even if the original image was highly accurate, that accuracy suffered loss as the image was copied and re-copied. The manuscript image, then, does not capture objective reality as we assume. Secondly, even when print technology made reproduction much more reliable, pictorial accuracy did not spring up automatically. For example, the 1492 Nuremberg Chronicle is a masterpiece of print illustration, but it does not rely on a sense of documentary evidence. Rather, its images carry a lively symbolic representation. It reuses images of generic kings and queens to represent particular kings and queens, people for whom (of course) no documentary images existed. Similarly, early printed herbals often featured images that only loosely resembled the plants they were meant to portray.14 A striking fact about the herbals of the sixteenth century, then, is that they were very much experiments in description, not only in text but also in image. While the other new herbals of Bock’s time did have illustrations, it is not entirely surprising that Bock’s book was put into print (at a significant cost, even without images) relying solely on text, and that it sold well enough to justify the expansion of the book with wood block prints. Our modern ideas about documentary evidence were in the process of being developed. In other words, when Bock made such a single-minded effort to observe and describe plants, he developed a technique parallel to the developing technique of making images of plants. Both techniques substantially revised the tradition of the herbal, emphasizing not the faithful copying of received authorities, but instead the disciplined observation of plants.

At the same time, Bock and his contemporaries were indebted to the tradition they reformed. The work of Dioscorides and other ancients established both the idea of the project and the basic ways of pursuing it. Notably, even as Bock radically rethought the work of Botany, he rejected a then-modern innovation—alphabetical order—in favour of the classical three-part division of plants into herbs, shrubs, and trees. While Otto Brunfels and Leonard Fuchs (the other two fathers of German Botany) ordered their books alphabetically, Bock returned to the older system of divisions. Within in these three parts, he grouped plants according to similarity of appearance, based on his observations. Thus, Bock took from Dioscorides a way of thinking about families of plants while taking a fresh look at the plants themselves. It will surprise us that Brunfels, slightly before Bock, heavily relied for his verbal descriptions on Italian herbals based on Dioscorides, and that he does not seem to have realized that there were regional variations in plant species—that plants might differ between Italy and Germany. (The main contribution of Brunfels—and of his illustrator, Hans Weiditz—was the “return to nature” in images.)15 This, though, was a learned blindness, and one that demonstrates Bock’s freshness of sight.

The entry for Bertram (Spanish Pellitory) in the Kreuter Buch.

The herbals of the sixteenth century typically combined text and image, and so it is notable that Bock’s first edition of the Kreuter Buch (1539) was not illustrated. The oft-repeated explanation for this is that he did not have the funds to afford images, which had the happy effect of forcing Bock to be unusually precise in his verbal descriptions of the plants, making his work stand out in German botany in this regard.

The entry for Bertram (Spanish Pellitory) in the Kreuter Buch.
Bock was thus a pioneer of descriptive botany (phytography); he recognized the corolla, stamens, and pistils “as essential parts of many flowers” and he built on the descriptions of Dioscorides to produce a much fuller record of not only the features of plants, but also their life cycles and their particular habitats. Bock’s method itself was considered noteworthy in his time. The English botanist William Turner, in his account of the fern, repeats Dioscorides’ description of the plant and then notes that “Dioscorides denyeth that the ferne hath anye fruit, and thereby that it hath also no seede, but not onelye the opinion of the common people is, that the ferne hath sede, but also it is the opinion of a Christen Phisicion, named Heironymus Tragus, who doth not only saye that ferne hath sede, but wrytith that he fonde upon mydsomer even sed upon brakes. I have taken oute of his herbal his worde concernyng that matter.” Turner had clearly been reading Bock’s Latin translation: Latin was still very much the common scholarly language of Europe, and Turner uses Bock’s Latin name. He goes on to provide an English translation of Bock’s detailed account of acquiring fern seed, something he did by accepting “the opinion of the common people” and then going out himself to find it.

Bock’s finding of fern-seed and Turner’s translation would be a perfect example of the new scientific world unfolding were it not for the actual method of getting the seed. According to folk tradition, this had to be done on the vigil of St John the Baptist, or midsummer eve, a practice that Bock followed, even while he set aside the various superstitious conjurings that accompanied the act. James Britten, in a late nineteenth century book, describes these magical folk traditions in some detail, and mentions that in “Russia the belief in the midsummer flowering of the fern is in full force” which takes us closer to Katharina Thiessen. The Lutheran minister (Bock), and the Mennonite midwife probably shared a sensibility, finding a path through folkways and modern methods, even across four centuries.

By the time Bock brought out a second edition in 1546, he had added many illustrations. The young artist David Kandel was responsible for these, basing many on the images in the books of Brunfels and Fuchs, but also making many from fresh observation.

Kandel’s artistry becomes most apparent in the third section of Bock’s book, on trees. The wood-cut print was in the height of its use as an artistic medium, and German woodcuts, led by the work of Albrecht Dürer, were very fine. Kandel’s woodcuts delightfully deliver a combination of first-rate botanical description and artistic significance. The illustration of the Buxbaum or box tree, for instance, provides a finely-rendered image of the tree and particularly its leaves, giving the reader a solid basis for identifying the tree in the wild. (We might think that coloured images would be preferable, but the line drawing remains the standard for field guides today, crisply capturing the distinguishing shape of the plant.) On either side
In the diaries of Jacob Epp (1821-1890), a Mennonite minister in Russia there are a number of entries where he refers to an instrument known as the Lebenswecker that was used to treat illnesses. The Life Awakener was part of a treatment plan promoted by Carl Baunscheidt (1809-1872), known as Baunscheidtism. The Life Awakener and the treatment to accompany his instrument was invented in 1847 and relied on the ancient idea that an illness could be ‘cured’, or relief from pain could obtained by a mild ‘counterirritation’ at a different place on the body from the more serious illness or site of pain. Baunscheidt’s version of this ancient practice came to be a popular treatment among Mennonites in Russia in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

The treatment involved using the Life Awakener, which was an instrument with a cluster of needles that were spring loaded and were used to penetrate the skin, but drawing no blood. Braunsheidt Oil, an oil that caused skin irritation and whose composition Baunsheidt kept secret, was then applied to the treated area causing inflammation. In theory, this allowed the body to rid itself of the poisons believed to cause the disease.

In his footnote to Epp’s first entry that mentions the Life Awakener, the editor and translator of the diaries, Harvey Dyck, recounts the memories of the treatment by Bernard H. Pauls (1877-1963) who married Epp’s niece.

In cases of illness there was a cure-all: lilac tea. It was good for colds and stomach aches. If lilac tea did not work, there was always the “Life Awakener.”

This was an apparatus suitable perhaps for curing horses. When I saw father bringing it out, I wanted only to be well.
It was a well-constructed thing about ten inches long. Made of dark wood, and tubular in form, it had a spiral spring running down its hollow centre. At the bottom of the tube was a stopper. This stopper was covered thickly with sharp needles, so that it looked almost like a brush. At the top of the tube a handle was affixed. When the handle was pulled upward and released the needle-studded stopper struck the spot where the Life Awakener had been attached. The spring could be pulled more tightly or less tightly, depending on one’s wishes and needs.

‘When the back or chest had been worked over in this way, the skin was quite red. This was good against colds and anything else. To achieve the maximum effect, the treated spots needed then to be rubbed with oil—I think it was called Baumscheidt (sic) oil. The area was finally covered with cotton wool and the body kept warm. Small, pus-filled blisters were thus formed, and in this way the illness was drawn out.’

Epp’s first mention of the instrument is dated November 12, 1860:

‘Brauchsheidism’ (sic) is a method of treatment recently discovered by a certain Karl Brauchscheidt (sic) from the Prussian Rhineland. [The overseer] v Kampen had sent away for one of these ‘life awakeners’ and had successfully used it a number of times. The apparatus was fastened twice on our infant son for infected eyes, and with good results. Today we tried it on my wife, who has fungal ulcer. May God bless the treatment.

The results of this first treatment were apparently encouraging. When the Life Awakener was used a few days later to treat the gardener, Peter Zöger for cataracts, Epp was “very curious to see what happens since the Life Awakener has certainly had positive results with my wife.”

Almost five years later, the instrument was still in use. On March 7, 1865, a Sunday, Epp had been suffering from a toothache for a number of days. The Life Awakener was applied “although it caused only slight inflammation, the pain let up a bit.”

A year later, on June 21, 1866, at 2:30 am Epp was called to the bed of v Kampen, the overseer who had originally ordered the Life Awakener from Germany, who “had come down with the cholera.” The Life Awakener was also used to treat this condition, whose symptoms included severe diarrhoea and cramps. Epp reports that “each time we buckled on the life awakener the cramps let up a little.” Further treatment by the Feldsher Israelsohn using alcohol rubs and bleeding the patient were unsuccessful. Kampen died at noon.

The last entry that refers to the Life Awakener is on October 21, 1872, a Saturday. Epp had to request someone to replace him at the next day’s worship service because of illness:

Around noon I had an attack of rheumatic pain that was so acute that I was barely able to make it home. I asked Paetkau to take tomorrow’s service. Around 3 p.m. my wife strapped the life awakener to my back. God bless the treatment. The pain is now bearable, and I am able to write these lines.

The Mennonite Heritage Village artifact in these pictures came with a record that outlined the varied conditions that the Life Awakener was supposedly suited for:

“a regulator of the blood, rheumatic pains, headache, toothache, cramps, quinsy, etc., etc.”
“diseases of the eye and ear, stiffness of the joints, ..., jaundice, hemorrhoids, anaemia, gout of all forms, inflammation of the throat, syphilis, etc.
“such critical cases as apoplexy, inflammation of the brain, and pneumonia, colitis, typhus, cholera, yellow fever, unconsciousness”

The Life Awakener spawned many imitators and had a following in German immigrant communities in the United States, Canada and Australia throughout the 19th century.

Endnotes
3 Dyck, 151. Epp refers to the Life Awakener being ‘fastened’ or ‘buckled’. Although Braunschweid’s original instrument was not fastened to the body, there were variations and imitations of the original instrument that may have featured an ability to somehow attach the instrument to the patient. See also John B. Toews, “Childbirth, Disease and Death Among the Mennonite in Nineteenth-Century Russia,” Mennonite Quarterly Review 60(3) (July 1986): 464, fn. 125.
4 Dyck, 195.
5 Dyck, 212.
6 Dyck, 348.
7 Mennonite Heritage Village, artifact collection, accession number 2014.28.19.
Comical Remedies for Stomach and Ear Ailments

By Ralph Friesen, Nelson, BC

My grandfather, Klaas R. Friesen (1870 – 1942) fathered twelve children, not counting those who died in infancy, and these little ones seemed to suffer from stomach aches and ear aches. In 1925, Klaas wrote down some home remedies in a black notebook for the edification of others dealing with such problems. Anyone reading these notes, however, would have quickly noticed that they are not meant to be taken entirely seriously. Klaas was a sober and earnest man, owner of Friesen Machine Shop and a minister of the Steinbach Kleine Gemeinde. But in these remedies he reveals a humorous, ironic side to his personality. In a comically poetic mood, he begins one page:

March 21, 1925

Gutes gesundes Kinder Futter
Die nicht haben eine Mutter
Auch kein gutes stücklein Butter.

(Good, healthy fodder
For children who have no mother
And no morsel of nice butter.)

Cook 1 quart milk for 3 minutes, cook barley water for 20 minutes, then strain the barley water through a cloth, add sugar to taste and cream.

That tastes very good, and is even better than it tastes, this I know. Yes! Yes! Yes!!—tastes good, ever better! And the babies will get well.

Stomach gas seems to have been something of a preoccupation; another remedy for it appears on the following page. But this cure, which begins ordinarily enough, rapidly plunges into the ironic, then the absurd:

Remedy for stomach gas! Which helps right away. Make a kind of cushion and fill it with Rogers’ flour, dampen it with wine, warm well, and place against your stomach, and that will always help, in the U. S. A., at least. Later after two years this always, certainly helps, just a little patience is needed, even if it doesn’t help so suddenly in 10 or 12 months, if it only starts to help after two or three years, that should be enoughhhh.

Similarly, he does not seem to take his own remedy for “a rushing sound in the ears” entirely seriously. It is a four-part prescription, beginning with a salt water solution, moving to heated olive oil, then to a mixture of lamb and pig fat, and concluding with will power:

A photo of Klaas R. Friesen, his wife Katherina and their family taken in July 1930. Image Credit: Ralph Friesen.
December 26, 1925

A good remedy for a rushing sound in the ears.

First: salt water, a teaspoon of warm water in which a good pinch of salt has been dissolved, this is dripped into the ear of the patient who is lying down, wait for 5 minutes and then do the same again in the other ear, 4 to 5 times daily. Considerable improvement should be noticeable after one week.

Secondly: use the best quality olive oil, three times daily. Make the oil as hot as can be endured, then drop it into the ear, then insert cotton wool. Always rinse out the ear with warm milk. By using this remedy for three weeks, many people have been healed, and felt no more pain for years afterward.

Thirdly: Make a salve from fat: lamb fat, an equal quantity of pig fat, melt together, stir into a cream as it cools, and apply in both ears.

Fourthly: Will power; that is, just don’t think about it, resist with an effort of will and divert yourself with sufficient vigour—naturally this does not heal, but does help to overcome the worst. So, if these remedies don’t help, then, then!! Well, then I don’t know what’s to be done. Maybe there still is some advice to be given, but then I don’t know how to recommend it. End. Klaas Friesen!!

The bottom line of the page is decorated with question marks, exclamation points, stars, and the like. Apparently Klaas’ inclination to believe in formulaic cures was at war with an ironic, humorous pragmatism. There was an inflated tone about folk remedies that Klaas could not resist puncturing by introducing the possibility that, perhaps, nothing could be done.

Endnotes

1 Some of this material was original published in Abraham S. Friesen, Steinbach Pioneer by Hilton Friesen and Ralph Friesen, 2004
Vegetable Gardens

Tracy Ruta Fuchs

Vegetable gardens were vital to the Mennonite household. Gardens were often large and required much care, and provided food for the family as well as additional income from the sale of vegetables. In Mennonite cooking the emphasis was on meats and starches, such as Kjielkje (noodles). However, the Mennonite kitchen featured vegetables in many forms. Some staples were pickled vegetables such as cucumbers, or cabbage made into Süakommst (brined shredded cabbage, also called sauerkraut), cabbage or beet borscht (soup), beans and root vegetables such as carrots, turnips, and potatoes cooked on their own or in soups. Vegetables and soups were flavoured with Zippel (onion) and herbs from the garden.

Vegetable Garden Structure

Upon initial Mennonite settlement in Manitoba in 1874, vegetable gardens were often located between the street and the housebarn. However, as shade trees in the front yard grew up, vegetable gardens were moved beside or behind the housebarn. It was convenient to have the vegetable garden close to the summer kitchen where food was prepared. An upper or front garden, located in the front part of the yard, with flowers or fruit trees and shrubs may have contained some early vegetables like rhubarb and onions.

The Mennonite vegetable garden was kept neat and free of weeds. Rows of vegetables were straight and usually a good width apart, so that there was room to walk between rows. A Mennonite woman recalls,

I remember their (grandparents’) vegetable gardens were well tended, well taken care of. Absolutely no weeds—always open to take visitors through. They would have paths in the vegetable garden lined with flowers, so you could stroll through the garden.

A wooden board or picket fence often surrounded the yard including the garden, on at least one side. The vegetable garden may have been surrounded by a wire fence to keep out roaming farm animals such as chickens or pigs.

In addition to the vegetable garden was the Baschtan (melon field). If room could be found, the melon field was usually at one side of the vegetable garden, or on its own as a separate field. This field was reserved for plants needing a lot of room to grow, often planted in large quantities: watermelons, cantaloupe, citron, pumpkins, cucumbers, potatoes, and on occasion, corn.
Vegetable Garden Bounty

It was a huge garden, we had piles (of vegetables and fruit); but...my mom had to plant so much in order to get enough for everybody for the winter.

All of the hard work and time spent planting, weeding, watering and battling insects paid off in the bounty produced from the vegetable garden. Some common vegetables grown in the Mennonite garden were cabbage, carrots, cucumbers, beans, beets, horseradish, kohlrabi, onions, parsnips, peas, rhubarb, tomatoes, turnips, and of course, potatoes. Melons such as cantaloupes, citron, and watermelons had a prominent place in the garden. Squash and pumpkins were also grown. Some fruits such as ground cherries and strawberries and currants, if they were not in an orchard, had a place in the vegetable garden. Herbs grown for cooking and home remedies were in or near the vegetable garden. And the bright yellow heads of sunflowers distinguished a Mennonite garden.

Potatoes (Eadschocke)

In 1740 the King of Prussia, Frederick the Great, introduced potatoes to the Mennonite people, and potatoes have been a staple in their kitchens ever since. When Mennonites moved from Prussia to South Russia, and again to Manitoba in 1874, they took this tradition of planting and eating potatoes with them. A Manitoba Mennonite settler in 1874 writes,

I walked to Winnipeg to get the few supplies we needed. I got some lard and bacon, which lasted a whole year. I also got some flour and potatoes. So our meals consisted of potatoes one day and Kjielkje (noodles) the next, flavored a bit with bacon.

A woman who grew up in Neubergthal, Manitoba recalls:

A huge amount of potatoes were harvested. Some people had a separate potato patch, but our garden was big enough, there was enough room for potatoes as well. I still remember being part of that, we’d haul the potatoes and there would be a chute (for the potatoes) going to the cellar. There was never a shortage of potatoes; we always had enough until the next crop was in. They were a staple.

Beans (Schaubele)

Beans, such as navy beans or pinto beans, were another staple in Mennonite households. A Manitoba Mennonite woman recalls how beans from the family vegetable garden were used:

We kept some green, and left some to ripen. My mom loved dried beans, used them for soup, you would use them as a source of protein. If there wasn’t a lot of meat, then we had beans.

In Russia, it was customary to cook beans on Saturday because women could go about other chores, in preparation for Sunday, while the beans were cooking. This habit carried over when Mennonites moved to Manitoba.

Having a meal of beans was always a very big staple. Very often that was done on laundry day, because you could set those to cook in the morning and they would be done by noon.”

Beans were cooked in a variety of styles. A woman from Steinbach, Manitoba describes a family favourite called Awajebrode Schaubele (navy beans and gravy):

Mom would make them (navy beans) with gravy. She would cook them with onions, water, and salt until they were done, then you would make a nice, thick cream gravy, maybe from ham, and put it over the beans like you would over potatoes.

Watermelons (Arbüz)

Mennonites learned of Arbüz (watermelons) from the Ukrainians when they came to South Russia in the late 1700s. Since then watermelons have been a favourite food of Mennonite people. They were often grown in great numbers, planted in the Baschtan or melon field where they had lots of room to grow. They may also have been planted right in the vegetable garden or in a separate patch beside it.

Mennonite farmer John W. Dueck lived in Friedensfeld, South Russia and wrote about watermelons: “There were loads, we could eat as much as we wanted until Christmas. Should there be one among them not quite ripe enough, we would feed it to the hogs.” Although watermelons grew in abundance, they were still valuable. “At the time when watermelons were starting to ripen, one or two watchmen stood guard” in case anyone should steal them.

Watermelons were eaten in many forms.

One year we grew 500 watermelons! Eaten fresh, pickled, or made into watermelon syrup, as in Russia. Mom and Dad loved baking sweetened with the syrup.”

The syrup was used instead of sugar. The watermelons used in Russia to make syrup were not like the ones currently found in grocery stores with bright pink insides, but were small, cream-coloured, and very sweet.

Sunflowers (Sonnebloome)

The tradition of growing sunflowers came to Manitoba with the Mennonite settlers from South Russia. Sunflowers were grown both for the seeds to eat, and as crops to extract oil from the seeds. Cornelius Penner recalls from the early 1900s in the Zagradowka Colony, “Father took me along to have our sunflower seeds pressed. The oil was used in cooking. Oil cakes were made from the compressed seeds and husks from which the oil had been extracted.” Eating these sunflower oil cakes helped some Mennonite families survive during the 1920-21 famine in Russia following the civil war.

Sunflowers were prominent in many Manitoba Mennonite vegetable gardens.

There were always sunflowers in the garden. Huge sunflowers. There were big sheaves of sunflowers, they were dried, the seeds knocked out, roasted, and we ate them. That was part of winter preparation, the sunflower seeds.

Mennonite friends would gather to rest, talk and knack Sot (crack and eat sunflowers seeds) together.

A group of Manitoba Mennonite women talk about the tradition of Knacksopt.

You wouldn’t put them (sunflower seed shells) in a con-
tainer, you would spit them on the floor and sweep the floor, then the floor would become all shiny from it.

I remember going to my cousins, they had a hardwood floor, and we were told, ‘Oh, yes, you can spit the seeds on the floor because it’s the way you polish the floor!’

It was from the oil in the seeds and shells, and the friction from walking on the sunflower seed shells that sanded the floor.

Did both men and women knack Sot?

Well, the women were usually busy making Faspa. Not only that, but women never sat with idle hands. They were always knitting, or crocheting, or something like that. I’m not saying we didn’t eat sunflower seeds. I remember even as a kid. But it was more the men that would sit and eat sunflower seeds.

Corn (Kuckeruz, Korn): A Latecomer

In Russia, Johann Cornies, as Chairman of the Agricultural Society in the 1800s, promoted the growing of corn by Mennonite farmers. Mamalega, a type of porridge made with cornmeal, was not enjoyed but helped Mennonites to survive the famine of 1920 in Russia. Corn was not established in Manitoba Mennonite gardens right away. In the Mennonite community of Blumenort, it was first grown in 1916.

In the center of the garden she (grandma) had two rows of corn and that was her highway. A good idea because it kept the grandkids from running all over the garden which she really didn’t like. If you wanted to go to the other end of the garden, you went down the highway.

Other Favourites from the Vegetable Garden

Asparagus (Sparjel)

We always had asparagus, but we never dug it (to eat), but my mother always used it for flower arrangements. We used it early in the spring before the peas were ready. It tasted very much like peas.

Cabbage (Kommst)

Grandparent’s favourites: certainly turnips, kohlrahi, and cabbage, lots of cabbage!

Citron (Citrona)

They look like little watermelons, but they sure don’t taste like watermelons. Yellowish inside. A clear yellow. They sure make nice jam.

Another opinion:

I never did like that jam.

Ground Cherries (Eadtjoasche, Jüdetjoasche)

I remember ground cherries in the garden. They made good jam and pies.

Kohlrahi (Kommstoat)

We had kohlrahi, always kohlrahi. We’d pick them when they were still quite little, we’d peel them and keep the stem on, and eat them like ice cream. We’d pretend they were ice cream! When they got bigger then my mom would slice them and she’d stew them with a bit of bacon fat and salt and pepper. They were wonderful, tasted good.

Pumpkin (Tjarps, Kopp)

We made Tjarps Pei (pumpkin pie). My mom dried pumpkin seeds too.

Rhubarb (Ruboaba)

Loved the rhubarb; I would pick one (stalk) and dunk it in sugar.

Sloe Bush (Schlee)

I remember a low bush in the vegetable garden—it tasted like chokecherry, it was Strüf (tart, acid). Schlee was the name of the plant—a plum type of bush. Tasted like the damson plums.
Herbs

Herbs were in the vegetable garden, close to the gate so you could get some for your soup.

Mennonite women grew herbs to spice up their daily meals, particularly soups. Three Mennonite favourites were dill, parsley and summer savoury. Dill (*Dell*) was plentiful and came up where it seeded. It was commonly used in soups such as Borscht and in cucumber and watermelon pickles. The parsley (*Peetaselj*) grown by Mennonites was the flat-leaved variety, and the leaves and roots were used as flavouring, often in soups.

The parsley was brought from Russia, the one kind especially. We always talk about the ‘old fashioned kind,’ there was a curly parsley that didn’t taste like anything, and they would say, ‘I don’t want that kind,’ I want the ‘old fashioned kind’ (not curly).

Summer savory (*Päpakrut*), an annual herb with a peppery taste, was known as the ‘bean herb’ often used to flavour fresh green beans.

Another herb commonly used in soups, especially in *Sommborscht* (Summer borscht), was *Sıarump* (sorrel). Sorrel is a perennial herb from the buckwheat family of plants. The leaves contain oxalic acid, which gives them a tangy taste. Some Mennonites brought sorrel seeds with them from Russia, and sorrel became established in many Mennonite gardens. Other settlers gathered it from the wild in the spring. Wild sorrel, found growing in many places in Manitoba, had bigger leaves and did not taste as sour.

Drying Herbs

Herbs were used when fresh but were also dried to last through the winter.

My grandmother would have dried that (summer savoury) just outside. She usually made bundles and hung them at the side of the house, or side of the summer kitchen. Tied them together and hung them up, that’s how she dried hers. That would have been right in the summer, when they were nice, before they started seeding. The taste is much more bitter if it was too late when they hung them up. But the parsley they hung up in fall when there were lots of roots. I can still see grandma’s parsley; she would put a needle through them, a bit Söcke-needle (a darning needle), and she would string them up, she would have a big string of them (about 5 feet). In her pantry she would have this string...
needed to feed the family, were often sold to enhance the Men-
garden." We have now sold over $50.00 worth from our
produce. We have sold some cabbage at 1 ½ cents
a pound and over 24 dollars worth of butter beans.

The Market Garden
John W. Dueck’s Diary, August, 1911: “I drove to Morris
with produce. We have now sold over $50.00 worth from our
garden.”

Vegetables and fruits from the garden, beyond what was
needed to feed the family, were often sold to enhance the Men-
nonite household income, especially when times were tough
Mennonite farmers could not always rely on grain other field
crop sales because harsh weather or insects were unpredict-
able and could ruin entire crops. A Gruenfeld farmer related
that due to drought, grain sales were poor but there was “good
income from the sale of garden vegetables and particularly
watermelons which, in Russia would have been thrown away,
are sold in the city for 5 cents a slice.”

Many factors affected how valuable the sale of garden
produce was, such as annual weather and market demand. For
example, John W. Dueck writes on August 12, 1911:

High demand in Winnipeg, because of population explo-
sion, but...because of excellent gardens everywhere, produce
prices are down with potatoes at 1 dollar a bushel (previ-
ously 2 or 3 dollars). We have sold some cabbage at 1 ½ cents
a pound and over 24 dollars worth of butter beans.

In any case the extra income from garden produce was
always welcome. Women, as the chief gardeners, had a major
role to play in bringing in this income to the family.

Gardening Methods
Cultivation to prepare the soil for planting was not done with
a machine, but with an animal and plough. In the early days
oxen were used. Peter Hamm writes about settling in Bergthal,
Manitoba in 1874, “we walked to Winnipeg (30 miles) many
times. Later we bought oxen and started planting. Seeding was
done by hand.”

In later years it was more common to use horses to cultivate
the gardens.

We had this plough, and we had this old mare, and we
hitched her to it. She was wonderful. Dad would till the
garden in the spring with a plough and harrow. He would go over
it with a harrow then we would plant. Dad had also made a
row-marker—he would drag that thing along to make your
rows. My brother and I worked together, and he was scared
of horses, so I had to lead the horse, and he handled the cul-
tivator behind the horse.

A horse was used to plough between the potatoes. We had
a special plough to push the dirt up on either side—to hill the
potatoes.

Chemicals to control weeds and insects are commonplace
in today’s gardening and farming. However, the early Men-
nonites used hard work and ingenuity.

We would hoe by hand between the rows to keep it clean.

In South Russia, a Mennonite farmer records on May 30,
1894: “A group went out to destroy grasshoppers—stomped
on them with their feet and squashed them.”

Even children picked potato bugs off of plants one by one.
They also used what was available in nature. One natural insect
control method was the use of Foxtail grass.

When the potato bugs started, then my father was in the
garden working. We didn’t have the things (chemical sprays)
we have now; he used this grass, Solt-grauss (Foxtail grass).
He would take a whole handful of that grass, tie it together,
dip the ends into water, and brush it over the potatoes. Very
practical.

Manure from farm animals, or ashes from a furnace or
outdoor oven, was used to replace nutrients in the soil on a
regular basis.

We had a couple of horses, seven or eight cows, a couple
of pigs, and the chickens ran loose in the barn. There was a
manure pile when the barn was cleaned. In the fall my dad
dumped some manure on the garden and that was our ferti-
izer. It was worked into the garden in the spring.

Crop rotation was another method used to keep gardens
productive.

When we started putting the garden in, my husband would
help me put the garden in and he’d say: “We’ll put everything
where it was last year.” I’d say: “Oh no we won’t, because my
mother said that doesn’t work.

You wouldn’t put corn the same place every year because
it takes too much out of the soil. Some plants take more out
of the soil than others do, so they would rotate. Potato and
carrots take other nutrients out of the soil than corn does. I’m
not a scientist, neither were they, but they learned it. They
remembered it from mother to daughter and so on.

Some plants needed a head start in the early spring before
they were placed in the garden, especially in Manitoba’s cold
climate. This was done using a Woam Bad (warm bed), which
was a wooden box filled with soil that had a glass, usually a
window, placed over top. The Woam Bad acted like a mini
greenhouse warming and protecting the plants while they
sprouted and grew. Some plants requiring an early start were
cabbage, tomatoes and melons. John Dueck in Gruenfeld,
East Reserve in Manitoba of 1910, wrote: “We had planted
watermelons and muskmelons under glass and these plants
have 3 leaves now...”

Where plants were placed in the vegetable garden was par-
tially personal preference, but some plants were companions.

I know my mom always planted the cucumbers next to the
corn. And it was so much fun picking cucumbers off the corn.
My mom always tried to plant something higher next to the
tomatoes, so they would be sheltered.

A Time to Plant
In the early years, Mennonites used a method of gardening
called “moon planting.” It was believed that in the “light of
the moon,” or when the moon was waxing, was the best time
to plant vegetables that grew above ground such as beans,
cucumbers, and lettuce; and the “dark of the moon,” or when the moon was waning, was the best time to plant vegetables that grew underground such as carrots, beets, and potatoes.

I know a lot of people that went by moon planting. I know some cousins of my mom’s—they swore by it. But we never did.

Other Mennonites thought that moon planting was just superstition, although it may not be wise to plant directly at the time of the full moon because there is a greater likelihood of frost.

Summary

The vegetable garden provided food and income for Mennonite families. Family members worked hard to keep the vegetable garden attractive and productive. Mennonite settlers did all of this without commercial chemicals or fertilizers. They could then enjoy the fruits of their labour such as the first juicy melon or a flavourful vegetable soup.

Endnotes

1 Adapted from Beauty and Sustenance: A History of Mennonite Gardens and Orchards in Russia and Manitoba (Steinbach: Mennonite Heritage Village, 2007), pp. 10-16. Used with permission.
3 Sara Klassen, Interview, November 19, 2004
5 Rose M. Hildebrand, More Precious…Than Gold: Our Heritage (by the author, 1997).
7 S. Klassen, Interview.
8 N. Giesbrecht, Interview.
15 N. Giesbrecht, Interview.
18 Dyck and Voth.
19 Loewen, Blumenort.
20 N. Giesbrecht, Interview.
21 Hiebert, Group Interview.
22 R. Wiebe, Interview.
23 Hiebert, Group Interview.
24 B. Janzen, Interview.
25 Liz Toews, Group Interview.
26 Betty Hiebert, Group Interview.
27 S. Klassen, Interview.
28 Schlee, or Schilie—the small, dark globose, astringent fruit of the blackthorn or sloe. Also called bullace or wild plum (Thiessen 2003).
30 Helen Peters, Interview, October 20, 2004.
31 H. Peters, Interview.
33 Dueck, Kroeker, and Dueck, Prairie Pilgrims.
34 R.M. Hildebrand, More Precious…Than Gold: Our Heritage (n.p., Rose Hildebrand, 1999).
35 S. Klassen, interview.
36 L. Toews, group interview.
38 J. Janzen, interview.
40 A. Bartel, interview.
41 S. Klassen, interview.
42 B. Hiebert, group interview.
43 R. Wiebe, interview.
44 Dueck, Kroeker, and Dueck. Prairie Pilgrims.
45 L. Toews, group interview.
46 B. Hiebert, group interview.
47 S. Klassen, interview.
48 R. Wiebe, interview.

The Garden(s) of Riva Palacios: A History

By Kerry Fast, Toronto, Ontario

In the summer of 2014, I spent one month in Riva Palacios colony in Bolivia interviewing women about their gardens. This was my second visit to Riva Palacios; I had been there four years earlier undertaking similar research. Riva Palacios is one of the oldest colonies in Bolivia. It was founded in 1967 by Old Colony Mennonites from Mexico, led by Aeltesta Ben Peters from Nordkolonie in Chihuahua. The main impetus for this migration was the modernization that colonies in northern Mexico were undergoing, with one of the flashpoints being the introduction of rubber tires to replace steel-rimmed ones on tractors. Now nearing the fifty-year mark of being in Bolivia, Riva Palacios had undergone substantial changes. No trace of the imposing jungle was evident during my visit—at least not to my eye. Brick houses had replaced the wooden structures built when Mennonites first settled Riva Palacios. Thirty-seven villages made up the colony, and all available space in the villages had been settled. Several people told me it was bursting at the seams. Riva Palacios has four daughter colonies in Bolivia (Pinondi, Manitoba, Dorado, and Nuevo Mexico), and Manitoba has established its own daughter colony. In the landscape of Bolivian Mennonite presence, Riva Palacios has definitely left its mark.

Gardens and the Changing Environment

There are many different angles from which one could look at the history of Riva Palacios, but gardens are a good way to begin. In my conversations with women about their gardens, it became evident that like so much else about the colony,
gardening had changed considerably over the course of Riva Palacios’s existence.

When the Chihuahuan Mennonites first moved to Bolivia, creating a habitable colony was uppermost in their minds. They were moving from a semiarid desert to jungle so the first task at hand was clearing land and building shelters. While the resources available to individual families varied depending on economic status, none were spared the hard work of clearing their land. Justina Peters moved to Bolivia with her widowed mother and sisters. She described how she, her mother and sisters created a farm out of the jungle when they first moved from Mexico. They had been fortunate in that they purchased a plot that had already been partially cleared. However, no fields had been cleared. While a bulldozer was used to clear the trees, Justina and her sisters had to remove the brush and burn it. For the next several years, the jungle kept sprouting on their fields and in their gardens as branches and brush rose to the surface of the soil and had to be removed even after their land had been cleared. Using a horse-drawn plow, they prepared the soil and in amongst the stumps they seeded corn and sorghum and their garden.

In Mexico, Old Colony women had, out of necessity, been gardeners because their produce was an essential component of food production. When Mennonites moved to Bolivia from Mexico, women brought vegetable seeds with them from Mexico in anticipation of establishing gardens and continuing this practice. Helen Enns and Gertrude Peters both described the bags of seeds their mothers had brought from Mexico, only to find out that they wouldn’t grow in Bolivia. Mennonites also had to adjust what they grew in their gardens. They had to resort to purchasing seeds in Bolivia. To the disappointment of many, corn did not grow well in Bolivia, at least not the sweet corn that they were accustomed to in Mexico. Anne Buhler recounted how her mother repeatedly tried to grow corn, but to no avail. Potatoes also didn’t produce in Bolivia like they had in Mexico. Riva Palacios Mennonites also had to get used to new kinds of fruit. While mangos and oranges were familiar to them, mandarins were foreign. The earliest settlers grew seedlings from seeds of fruit, and Gertrude Peters noted how these early citrus trees had many thorns, making it difficult to pick the fruit. Families that arrived a few years later learned from this early experiment and purchased grafted seedlings that had fewer thorns. Preserving also had to be adapted. In Mexico, the fruit women preserved was fruit they had raised. But in Bolivia, the only fruit from their orchards that they could can was mango. If they were going to can any fruit, it had to be purchased. Anne Buhler remembered missing strawberries, which had been readily available in Mexico. It wasn’t until she visited Paraguay as a young woman (her family had immigrated to Bolivia when she was seven), that she again ate strawberries.

As I’ve already described, taming the wilderness involved hard labor. Jungle had to be cleared, brush and trees burned, soiled tilled. But while the work was hard, the gardens and fields bore plentiful fruit. Justina Peters remembers the abundance of watermelon and flowers that her mother’s early garden
The pile of watermelons that her mother stored under the bench in the entrance to their house spilled out like a cornucopia. Anne Buhler’s mother had a garden filled with many varieties of vegetables and many fruit trees, of which their neighbors were invited to pick. Gertrude Peters talked about how in some years she could bring in three harvests per year. But this fertility has not lasted. Everyone on Riva Palacios is aware of significant environmental changes in the past fifty years. The fertility of the soil has decreased, and the weather has changed for the worse, at least as it relates to agriculture and gardens. In the early years, there had been no need for herbicides and pesticides on the fields. Anne Peters stated how they had been able to grow peanuts in their garden in the early years, but now they grow them only on the fields because they require fertilizer, which doesn’t get used in gardens. Some talked about how the nutrients of the natural compost of the untouched forest had been depleted by Mennonite agriculture and gardening. According to Justina Peters, in the early years the land had been fresch (new, untouched). Other theories also existed about this early fertility. Marie Enns and others commented that the ash from burning all the trees that had been cleared had made the soil fertile. That, together with an abundance of rain, had resulted in fertile gardens. But the rainfall too had changed. Gertrude Peters described how she had often, when walking home from her brother’s in a neighboring village in the early years, seen lightning. This was a sure sign that it would rain. Now more often than not, there could be lightning, but no rain.

If rainfall had decreased, wind had increased. It was clear to everyone that the increased winds were the result of the wholesale removal of trees from the colony to create arable land. When the colony was initially settled, much forest had remained, but gradually all the trees had been cleared, which resulted in much stronger winds, and these winds affected gardens adversely. Even with the mandatory shelter belts that the Bolivian government now requires, winds still have an adverse effect on the colony’s fertility. Anne Peters couldn’t explain why, but somehow the increased winds adversely affected the crops. Fruit trees also bore less fruit because of the wind. Anne Buhler described how the tomato plants were battered by the wind; one day they bent over sideways in one direction from the wind and then the next day the wind blew them over in the other direction. To mitigate wind damage, Anne Buhler covered her garden with a quonset-like tarp. Anne Peters had erected a fence draped with the plastic of feed bags to impede the wind.

When I approached women to talk about their gardens, many responded to my question by stating that not many women gardened anymore. That is not to say that no women garden but in the almost fifty years of Riva Palacios’s existence, food production has changed significantly. When the colony began, most families had gardens. They brought the practice with them from Mexico and depended on the garden’s produce to feed their families. Now many families don’t have gardens. Obviously the environmental changes experienced by Riva Palacios have had a significant effect on the demise of gardening. Gardens are now more work than they used to be because they have to be irrigated regularly and protected from the wind. But for this increased labor, they yield fewer vegetables. Tied into this decrease in fertility is the fact that younger women in particular, no longer garden. According to Anne Buhler, they have too much work to do to find time to garden. It’s mostly older women who can afford a kjäkjsche (hired domestic help) who garden. Anne’s married daughters don’t have gardens; Tina would like one, but all she can manage is a few tomato plants in pots. Neither did any of Justina Peters’ married daughters have a garden. As her daughter Sara pointed out, a vegetable truck comes to the colony twice a week and many people buy their vegetables from it. The convenience and the time and effort saved are welcomed. As much as she enjoyed making a garden, for Marie Enns it didn’t pay to have a garden anymore because gardens didn’t produce like they used to. Gardening is no longer a necessity in food production like it was in the beginning years of Riva Palacios settlement. Fruits and vegetables are readily available for purchase, shopping trips are made regularly to Santa Cruz for supplies, and for those women who prefer not to make the trip, the mobile vegetable/fruit stand and local cheese factories and stores sell the produce they need.

Why Garden?

But what of the women who do have gardens? Helen Enns gardens with her daughter. They grow greens, onions, carrots, dill, tomatoes, parsley, medicinal herbs, peppers, among other plants. Anne Peters grows many herbs in her garden including dill, parsley, mint, yarrow, thyme and both Mexican and Honduran summer savory, along with tomatoes, cabbages, lettuce, carrots and peppers. These were big, luscious gardens, and both women took pride in them.

So why do women garden on Riva Palacios if “it doesn’t pay” anymore? The women who I spoke to who do garden, do it because they enjoy it. Anne Buhler was perhaps the most exuberant about her garden. An excellent cook, she wanted to use only the best ingredients in her food preparation. The year I visited, she had not had a good garden crop, and she
lamented that she had to use store-bought tomatoes to cook with. She gardens because her own vegetables taste so much better than the ones the pedlā sells or ones she can buy at the cheese factory. She doesn’t make peanut soup with any other peanuts except ones they raise themselves because of their superior flavor. She told me several times how much she wished she could raise sweet corn like they had had in Mexico. On a visit to her sister-in-law, when I asked why she had gardened, her sister-in-law answered because she enjoyed going into her garden and picking vegetables. Anne could well identify with this pleasure, and she exclaimed, “and garden vegetables smell so good.” Anne Peters gave me a tour of her garden that consisted of an animated narration of what she used each herb for, whether culinary or medicinal. Even when gardening was a necessity, as it no longer is, women took personal satisfaction in their gardens. I have already mentioned the bumper crop of watermelons that has remained a family story in Justina Peters’s family. For women like Anne Buhler and others, gardening was a continuation of a practice of earlier generations, but it was also a matter of personal satisfaction.

Women remain the primary producers of food on Riva Palacios, even if the importance of gardens has diminished. In a society where there is more than enough work to keep women busy, increasingly they welcome the convenience of being able to purchase vegetables rather than devoting many hours to preparing, tending and harvesting gardens.

**Riva Palacios as a Garden: Cultivating a Metaphoric Garden**

I turn now from the practical, hands-on history of gardening in Riva Palacios to its sacred history. In 1997, the Ältesten of three Old Colony Bolivian colonies, Riva Palacias, Swift Current and Santa Rita, all settled by Old Colony Mennonites from Chihuahua Mexico in the late 1960s, laid out their version of the history and purpose of their colonies in a pamphlet entitled “A remembering and defense of the Reinlander Mennonite Gemeinde; at the request of the Bolivian people, to make known where our forebears came from and how Mennonites have taken root and propagated themselves.” The German words that these Ältesten use are “entwickelt” and “fortgepflanzt,” which I hope I have not taken too much liberty in translating as “taken root” and “propagating.” The primary designation that these colony leaders use to describe the people of their colonies is “geringes Ackervolk,” a humble agricultural people, so it is not surprising that they would use garden imagery to define themselves as they do in the title to their tract. But the title is not the only place where the Ältesten draw on metaphors of cultivation. It is woven throughout their account. Several times in their historical recounting, the Ältesten return to the word “gepflantz.” When Ältester Johann Wiebe took their people to Canada from Russia in 1875, he taught that parents should implant (einpflanzen) in their children the lifestyle and values of a geringes Ackervolk. Fast forward to the 1960s when Old
Colony groups moved to Bolivia from Mexico, it was the school teachers, along with parents, who were entrusted with implanting true Old Colony religion in the children.

This dedication to metaphor enriches the theological history that the Ältesten lay out, but the importance of gardening to Old Colony religious life is not only metaphorically for these Old Colony Ältesten. The primary means by which Old Colony Mennonites have taken root and propagated themselves in Bolivia, that is, the way they ensured that their values and lifestyle would be perpetuated in the next generation, has been to “work together with our children on the field, in the garden, with livestock and in the dairy.” The Ältesten leave no doubt how Old Colony Mennonites live as a faithful people of God. The tending of their sacred space, the colony, requires two kinds of cultivation. The land—fields and gardens—must, of course, be tilled, seeded and harvested if this sacred space is to flourish, but inseparably intertwined with this version of livelihood is the less tangible work of cultivating a generation worthy of that task. And as the Ältesten make clear, one cannot be done without the other. The actual making of gardens and cultivating of fields is necessary if the colony is to be a garden, metaphorically speaking, where Old Colony Mennonites can live faithfully.

On Riva Palacios, gardens and fields were places where the fertility of the jungle was harnessed for productivity; liminal spaces where jungle and wild animals linger in memory but have been replaced by order and productivity. It is not surprising, then that gardens, fields and dairies, these liminal spaces between the jungle of the past and the prosperity of the present are seen as necessary spaces to shape children. Here they must be taught again, not so much in word as in deed, the meaning of being a humble agricultural people; learning from one’s parents the way to work, the way to make a living on fields and in gardens. In a very real sense, and not only theological, cultivation, gardening, is a cornerstone of Old Colony confession (Bekenntnis).

Against the backdrop of this sacred history, several women lamented the spiritual decline of the colony as well. “Haft de Menschheit sijk jeendet?” (Have the people changed?) asked Justina Peters rhetorically. There was no question in her mind. “We are no longer the humble agricultural folk we were when we came here.” These sentiments were echoed almost exactly by Gertrude Peters and Helen Enns. People follow the latest fads, they have become proud. It is probably not surprising that the three oldest women I spoke with held this view, although a few middle-aged women also expressed this sentiment. They had moved from Mexico to Bolivia as teenagers, they could remember well the early years and had seen the biggest changes on the colony. Compared to the back-breaking work these women had undertaken as teenagers and young women, the young generation had an easy life in their estimation. The gardening that the Ältesten claimed was central to the perpetuation of Old Colony faith and life had become optional. It is not surprising that this perceived loss of humility and faithfulness was, in the opinion of these three women, symbolized by the large, new tractors that were being used on the colony. In contrast to the sacred garden space described by the Ältesten, where no mechanization was needed, where the bodies and hands of parents and children together worked the soil, these women saw the greatest disruption of this model at the opposite end of the spectrum of cultivation—the fields, gardening on the largest scale possible on a colony.

While this turning back to beginnings is not a new nostalgia, nor the exclusive purview of Old Colony Mennonite women, it does hold in tension conflicting meanings of gardens. Riva Palacios is a sacred space maintained through careful hands-on instruction by parents to children of how to garden, work in the fields, milk cows and yet these “tenants of faith” are disappearing. It is a place where creating this sacred space has resulted in environmental destruction that is adversely affecting the well-being of the colony and challenging the very lifestyle Riva Palacios’s Old Colony Mennonites are seeking to maintain. It is a space where the hard physical labor that is needed to grow gardens and raise crops is valued, but which has contributed to a prosperity that some colony residents now fear. And then there are the larger forces beyond the control of Riva Palacians that I have not written about—global economies, Bolivian politics, environmental change—all of which have a significant effect on Riva Palacios’s fertility. It is not for naught that the Ältesten draw attention to the task of being attentive to the cultivating of colony life.

Now when I look back at my time on Riva Palacios, I realize that there was a demographic group of women I failed to talk to about gardening. I was focused on finding women who gardened and thus spoke mostly with middle-aged or older women who had a past to remember. What would I have encountered had I spoken about gardening with young women who had a future to create? What would they make of their lack...
of gardening? Without the hands-on, back-breaking memory of
transforming a forest into gardens and fields, how would they
place themselves and their futures into their sacred history?
How would they work at “rooting” themselves and “propagat-
ing” their values and lifestyle in the garden of Riva Palacios?

Endnotes
1 For a more comprehensive discussion of the impact of changing environmental
patterns on the agriculture of Riva Palacios, see Ben Nobbs-Thiessen, “Cheese is
Culture and Soy is Commodity: Environmental Change in a Bolivian Mennonite
2 I wish to thank my friend Arlene Macdonald, University of Texas Medical
Branch, Galveston, for this idea.

Mennonite Men Consider the Flowers

By Susie Fisher, Gretna, MB

Manitoba writers such as Tracy Ruta Fuchs, Eleanor
Chornoboy, as well as other researchers like James Urry and
Eunice Adorno have demonstrated that it was Mennonite
women throughout Manitoba Mennonite history who took
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greatest pride in flower culture; they worked hard to keep their
flower gardens, in particular, “productive and attractive.”1 At
times, women’s flower gardens generated a certain level of
competition between households, or were perhaps devised and
maintained according to home fashion trends accompanying a
shifting national socio-cultural climate. Most Mennonite
women recall, nonetheless, that flower gardens were spaces in
which they sought solitude or fostered kinship.2 These
researchers believe that Mennonite women expressed their in-
dividuality, creativity, and femininity by way of flower culture,
and thereby shaped a distinct version of Mennonite ethnicity.
However, the archives also offer a window into the historical
relationship between Mennonite men and flowers, particularly
in the decades leading up to the turn of the twentieth century.
Artefacts, diaries, oral history, and memoirs together offer a
unique reading of the multiple ways Mennonite men in Rus-
sia and Manitoba treasured and documented the flora of their
surroundings.

Native flora and flower gardens in Mennonite villages on
the landscape of New Russia are alluded to in the personal
documents of numerous Mennonite men, unlike North Ameri-
can Mennonite flower culture, which seems in both reports
and memories to be more closely associated with Mennonite
women’s work, identity, and delight. The Mennonite flower
culture of Russia, in particular, is associated with the work,
 enjoyment, and the nostalgic reflections of Mennonite men.
Such extensive commentary reflects Russia’s evocative hold in
the mind’s eye of Mennonite individuals, alongside the
time-honoured convention of concern for beauty rooted in
the colours and textures of nature. Mennonites cherished and
worked to beautify the landscapes they inhabited, and upon
leaving these landscapes behind, longed for the splendour of
their former home. More importantly, the creators of these
documents do not speak to an exclusive association between
flowers and femininity. Mennonite men documented flowers in
efforts to express affective concern for the people with whom
and places in which they lived their daily lives. In a 1913 issue
of the Russian Mennonite journal Mennonitisches Jahrbuch,
Cornelius Hildebrand Sr. offers readers a melancholy vignette of
Mennonite life in Chortitza in May of 1840, centered around
careful observation of flower culture. The article opens with a
discussion of the “peaceful, restful atmosphere [which] seems
to have taken over all of nature”3 on a Sunday morning in the
village. Hildebrand explains that on Sundays, Mennonites
from Russia were beckoned to a collective worship service in
the local schoolhouse.4 As per tradition, the Mumtjes (married
women) carried sprigs of Marienblatt (pennyroyal), grown in
their gardens especially for these walks to the church. If pen-
nyroyal was not available, they carried instead a sweet-smelling
rose or a sprig of “wild thyme” brought in from the fields the
previous day. “After all,” explains Hildebrand, “when one
sits in church one’s senses must be able to perceive a ‘Sunday
fragrance.’”5 Once in the sanctuary, a young woman, “feel-
ing a delicate sneeze coming on, cautiously takes her stiffly
starched cloth bag which contains the Marienblatt or a sprig of
thyme, and wafts it back and forth a few times under her
nose, releasing a veritable cloud of herbal perfume which drifts
slowly over to her neighbour.”6 To further invoke the festive
atmosphere of a spring Sunday, every household was adorned
with “a cluster of blue lilacs interspersed with long-stemmed
tulips set in a vase or pitcher and plated on the table in the best
room.”7 Hildebrand posits that this practice “could be seen as
a kind of altar offering, not unlike the practice followed by
worshippers in the temple of ancient Jerusalem.”8

Hildebrand’s vignette is similar to an experience described
a generation later in the diary of thirty-seven-year-old farmer
and landowner Dietrich Gaeddert, who richly documented
his everyday life in Russia. In April 1872, Gaeddert joyfully
observed, alongside other “heavenly” signs of spring, that
“in the meadow the cowslips, violets and many lilies [were]
blooming.”9 Likewise, in his autobiographical collection of
memories from the Molotschna colony in the 1920s, Henry
Bernard Tiessen offers a description of Mennonite flower
culture in Ukraine. His writing emphasizes the temperate
climate of the area, due in part to the nearness of the Sea of
Asov. Accordingly, “all kinds of fruits, vegetables, and flowers
grew in great profusion.”10 Tiessen notes that every villager,
regardless of wealth, had some flowers at the front of their
homes or in their gardens, indicating that class did not dictate
one’s will or ability to plant flowers. Rather, flower gardening
and yard beautification were symbols of friendly, neighbourly
competition, regardless of wealth. “There seemed to be some
unwritten law among the villagers,” he suggests, “which led
them to try to outdo each other in beautifying their places.”
Even Mennonite children had a special affinity with flowers
in New Russia. Tiessen explains, “In the twilight the children
would play hide-and-go-seek behind the trees and dense
bushes. The young lads and lasses, inspired by romanticism,
would carry beautiful roses in their lapels.”11

Immigrant Mennonite men also treasured the native flowers
on the south Russian landscape. In October 1998, Helen Reimer
Bergmann donated an assortment of pressed flowers—gathered

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by her father throughout the 1920s in and around the Molotschna region—to the Mennonite Heritage Archives (MHA) Archives in Winnipeg. Following his service as an ambulance attendant in World War I, Jacob H. Reimer began this collection of flowers in 1919, which he continued until his departure from the Soviet Union. Reimer immigrated to Manitoba with his young family in 1924 and they settled for a time in Gretna. As per the collection notes accompanying Reimer’s notebooks, the pressed flowers offer a window into the native vegetation of the Molotschna area and may give some suggestions as to what inhabitants used for daily food, medicine, or beauty. A sampling of the collection reveals the following flowers and plants, which may have been used for any of these purposes: chamomile, summer savory, sage, love in a mist, loosestrife, wallflower, clover, nettle, wild sunflower, pansy, shepherd’s purse, sweet violet, larkspur, and silverweed. The fact that Reimer brought thirteen notebooks filled with carefully arranged pressed flowers with him to Canada—and took the time to tag them with their popular and technical names in Russian, German, and English—indicates that these flowers held significance in his life.

Much is known about Reimer’s life in Canada—he was a teacher, an occasional farmer, he married for a second time after the death of his first wife, and retired in southern Ontario. Less is known, however, about what inspired him to generate this collection of flora. Manitoba poet Sarah Klassen, who became acquainted with the Reimer family when Reimer married her aunt Aganetha Klassen in 1938, remembers him as a “quiet, sensitive man who loved learning and would have wanted rest often,” but that he was also an intelligent and curious man, a “bookish person who loved learning and would have wanted more education.” While Klassen also recalls that Reimer “suffer[ed] from nerves and needed to rest often,” but that he was also an intelligent and curious man, a “bookish person who loved learning and would have wanted more education.” While Klassen’s recollections do not relate to the native plant collection, they do provide some insight into Reimer’s personhood as a quiet and learned man. These traits align with the activity of collection, for it seems Reimer spent a great deal of time in solitude, outdoors, and paid careful attention to his surroundings. Reimer’s daughter’s travel diary also lends a clue to the meaning of the collection in his life and the lives of his kin. In a letter to the MHA archivist, on 28 October 1998, she explained that upon leaving the Archives building she wrote the following in her travel diary: “so this precious piece of Papa’s life is left behind. As we walk outside the building genuine sadness overtakes me; it is as if I have left a part of myself there.” The collection and its preservation over the course of Reimer’s life disclose the enduring power of landscape and flora in shaping individual identities.

By 1874, once Mennonites began to arrive in Manitoba, men continued to document both the land and landscaping efforts in their communities, though seemingly with less poeticsim and little nostalgia. Interestingly, the concern for neighbourly competition does remain. In his 1879 diary, seventy-one-year-old Abraham F. Reimer of Blumenort, located on the East Reserve, writes about the arrival of spring by detailing local instances of flower planting. On 6 May, Reimer reports that he ploughed the garden, and his wife “planted all her flowers in the garden and [so] have others in the village. And in Steinbach [they] have all planted their flowers.” More concern with the neighbours’ yard beautification can be noted when later that week, Reimer explains that at the household of Johan Kops they “transplanted all their [house-begun?] flowers.” Photographs of early West Reserve life also provide a small window into early North American Mennonite flower culture. Because Mennonites rarely documented their daily lives by way of photographs—believing photography to be too worldly—and if there were photographs, they were commonly taken by outsiders or young Mennonite men not yet baptized, pictures indeed reveal the extent to which men’s aesthetic concerns were considered in daily life. At the turn of the twentieth century, Mennonites in Manitoba were commonly photographed in front of the natural backdrop of a flower garden, lilac hedge, or picket fence lined with flowers. Indoor portraits, too, frequently exhibit flowers that have been deliberately positioned in the photo. And in candid photographs, flowers are easy to spot in the background. The photographs of Peter Gerhard Hamm (1883–1965), an amateur photographer in Neuberghal who left a rich legacy of nearly five hundred photographs, document well the daily lives of Mennonites on Manitoba’s West Reserve. Hamm’s photographs capture a great deal of Mennonite flower culture from the turn of the twentieth century into the 1930s. For example, one photograph (Figure 2.) pictures two women against a backdrop of trees, holding flowers. Another photograph (Figure 3.) pictures a couple sitting in front of a barn, while three vases full of flowers have been intentionally placed before them.

In an indoor photograph of four children in a verandah, (Figure 4.) viewers can see several tobacco tins of overwintered geraniums in the background, tall and reaching for the light. Finally, a formal indoor portrait of a woman sitting before Hamm’s signature curtained backdrop (Figure 5.) also depicts a potted plant on a table beside her, presumably intended to
add interest and beauty to the photograph. These photographs demonstrate flowers to be among Hamm's aesthetic and cultural preferences as well as a central feature of daily life in Mennonite villages and households. But what is more, particularly in photographs such as the one pictured here, women are bedecked and surrounded by flowers, also indicating an association between femininity and flower culture in Manitoba's early twentieth century Mennonite locales.

As historian Simon Schama has argued, and as the above examples demonstrate, humans have long communicated cultural and spiritual affinities with nature. Landscapes, memories of landscapes, and efforts to document such, can be read like texts to reveal these affinities. Mennonite memories of flowers in New Russia delineate the inviolability that certain landscapes take on, particularly after they have been left or are no longer in view. This nostalgic perspective, over time, carefully preserves memories of a particular landscape. These memories assume the form of the landscape itself, therefore transforming absence into ever-presence in the mind's eye. Documents like Jacob Reimer's pressed flower collection, alongside diaries and memoirs, are thus "archives of the feet," to employ Schama's terminology, representing an identity, wanderings and sightings, and a sustained memory of home by way of flowers.

In Manitoba, records produced by Mennonite men, such as photographs, also depict flowers, though in a much more systematic way—either in the background of daily life, as decor or outfitting, or in casual references to changing seasons. While this trend indicates a change to the overarching Mennonite relationship with flowers, they are nonetheless a pervasive cultural influence.
An 1895 visitor to a West Reserve Manitoba Garden

E. Cora Hind was an early feminist and journalist. This is an excerpt of an article about her trip to Winkler in 1895.

The gardens of the Mennonites at once proclaim their German origin. They do not, as a rule, surround the house, but are at the side, often with the driveway between them and the house. The garden enclosure is generally a square one with a row of trees making and avenue all around the garden and a fine protection from cold winds. In the inner square are currant and gooseberry bushes, neat and regular beds of vegetables and great masses of flowers. In the centre of the square, a rustic summerhouse forms a pleasant retreat for the family on warm evenings. In and about Plum Coulee, where, as the name indicates, there are large quantities of wild plums, the Mennonites have cultivated and grafted them and produced a very fine fruit. The supply is of course limited and so far has made no showing as a marketable product, but if the good work goes on, as it should do, in time we may have a good supply of native fruit of fine quality. Their finely cultivated gardens have proved one of the great sources of Mennonite prosperity. In addition to the gardens proper, many of the houses have flowerbeds under the windows, and few houses are without window plants.

A Walk through the Gardens in the Archives

By Hans Werner, Winnipeg, MB

Gardens have been an important part of Mennonite life, as a necessity to provide fresh fruits and vegetables in the summer, or a fall harvest that had to peeled, diced, pickled, or bagged, buried and stored for the short days but long months of winter. But gardens were also a source of beauty, a favourite place for a quiet moment of contemplation, or the place of choice for a wedding or family photo. Images of gardens in the past face an insurmountable obstacle in conveying what they represented to their creators—they have no colour. The images that we feature here represent a short ‘walk’ through the gardens that we find in the archives.

The Gardens of the Estates during the “Golden Age” in Russia

One of the most iconic images of Mennonite wealth in the Russian Empire is this photo of the Garden Alley on the Apanlee Estate of the David Dick family. The alley is bordered by chestnut trees and an immaculately trimmed hedge. David and Katharina Dick were both children of estate owners and the family ultimately inherited or purchased additional estates. Their holdings included some 8,050 dessiatines (21,750 acres) of land. Image Credit: Gerhard Lohrenz, Heritage Remembered, Mennonite Heritage Archives, MHC 044-718.0.

A photo of a visit in the garden of Franz Fehderau in the Crimea on May 19, 1914. World War One, would break out out a few months later and would signalling the beginning of a period that ultimately ended the era of estate ownership. Image Credit: Mennonite Heritage Archives, MHC
The Marianovka Estate was owned by the Jacob P. Wall family and was located north of the Molotschna Colony. The family also owned the neighbouring Katerinovka Estate. The photo above has significant damage, but the large garden in the foreground is clearly an important feature of the estate complex. The photo on the left shows the Wall family leaving for a wedding. Behind the assembled family we see a well cared for yard with flowers, potted plants and a fountain. Image Credit: MHC 650-3.0

The gate to the yard of Abram Matthies in the Caucasus region of the Russian Empire. The owners of Mennonite estates as well as those living in colony villages, considered the planning of trees and orchards to be a necessity for any Mennonite farmstead. Image Credit: MHC 044-321.0
Gardens on the Frontier

Settlement in the very new and different environment of the Chaco in Paraguay required considerable innovation and experimentation. The familiar plants no longer grew, and new plants had to be tested to find their usefulness in the Mennonite kitchen. Or alternatively, new aesthetic tastes had to replace familiar and cherished beauty. The photos from the Chaco are part of the Samuel McRoberts Collection and were taken by Fred Engen, a McRoberts employee, when Manitoba and Saskatchewan Mennonites started the Menno Colony in the Chaco region of Paraguay. Engen died and was buried in Paraguay.

A potato trial plot in the nursery garden at Hoffnungsfeld. A barbed wire fence surrounds the garden and in the background, is grassland and the Chaco bush. Image Credit: MHC 713-Bkl-078.

The roadway through the Hoffnungsfeld nursery garden. The face of the man in the photo is dwarfed by the leaves of the banana trees, not a crop that prairie farmers and gardeners would have been familiar with. Image Credit: MHC 713-BKT-079.

Certainly, the chestnut trees and cherry orchards of Russia, or the crab-apple trees of Manitoba could not be transplanted to the Chaco. Four rows of very young orange trees surrounded by banana trees represented a new way of thinking about an orchard. Image Credit: MHC 713-BK5-186.
Food and Spirituality

By Daphne Thiessen, Abbotsford, BC

As words and phrases like: text, food, postmodernism, world view, understanding God, and spirituality tumbled through my thoughts while thinking about what part of my story I would share this morning, a word that kept popping into my head was “real”.

Reading C. S. Lewis’ *The Great Divorce* in early adulthood began a shift in perspective for me on the relationship between earth and heaven. Lewis paints a picture of things becoming “more real” as we point ourselves in the direction of Christ and heaven. And the idea that I can already set my trajectory towards heaven (or hell) here on this earth by my actions and attitudes, has resonated with me in a deep way as I seek to sincerely live as a Christian. I can easily apply this to a trip to the grocery store: As I walk the “middle aisles” of the store, I see: instant this and eat-on-the run that, ingredient lists that need a scientific dictionary to decipher, and words like reconstituted, fortified, simulated, and artificial all being sold as edible and delicious! In all of this I am often suspicious of a conspiracy to distract me with bright packaging in order for me to not notice that half of what I am consuming is not even actually food. By choosing fresh things and whole things and things I can recognize as food that was probably living not so long ago - I bring my connection to food and eating back in touch with the earth and how it can not only give me calories but nourish my body and even soul. This has not always been a simple or easy road for me. I have struggled with what ‘real’ eating means. Words like ‘raw’, ‘organic’, ‘whole’, ‘natural’, ‘homemade’, ‘sustainable’ and ‘eco-friendly’ all fit in that category but are sometimes exclusive of each other. This tension has meant that food has not always been a comfort. At times buying—and eating—food has been a source of guilt and anxiety and has been an enemy which destroyed my physical health and complicated my spiritual beliefs in a loving God who created “all things good”. A big reason why gardening has been especially meaningful to me, is that my garden is a place where the line between the reality of heaven and the real-ness of the world gets fuzzy. I can connect the dots between a seed that came from no less than God’s hand, now in mine, which I put back in the earth God created to let the soil and the worms and the rain and the sun work its supernatural magic (which yes, I understand is a scientifically explainable process) and it turns into something living and breathing which spreads and produces 100 pounds of the brightest orange pumpkins. This is awe-inspiring to me.

There are endless ways I can point myself in Christ’s direction. Sometimes this involves actions, sometimes this involves changes within my mind and heart. Food is something that we all deal with every day of our lives and it can easily become boring and monotonous. Yet at the same time, there are many facets to food that help me centre myself on Christ: from sharing it in community, to buying it ethically, to not over or under using it.

I am picking just a very few of these facets to talk about this morning.

**Taking time to make and share food with others helps me slow down.**

I don’t like to be busy, I don’t like to drive too fast, I get overwhelmed when I’m constantly jumping from one obligation...
to another with no place to rest in between. I do much better one-on-one than in a crowd. In our home, I am trying to create habits which choose to not buy into the hectic, worried culture around us which thrives on stimulation, instant gratification and physical comfort.

By choosing a slower approach to life, I am trying to rediscover a way of interacting with my world in a more deliberate way. Sometimes people are astonished at the fact that I make all our own bread, that I make homemade relish, that I make homemade ice cream, that our family sits down to eat - all together - sometimes five, most often seven, days a week. To some, it seems like I am choosing a hustler life (for why would anyone waste time reducing tomatoes down into ketchup instead of buying Heinz off the shelf?) but for me, it is the opposite. Part of my motivation for cooking this way is simply because I enjoy being a do-it-yourselfer, but it is also a conscious effort I have made to, instead of rushing through things in order to be able to do more, to rather put more time into fewer things and really experience all I do. As I sit around my table with loved ones after enjoying bread made with my own hands, we are creating the space to be present to each other which leads me to appreciation of God’s provisions for us. And I can reclaim again that even though the world sometimes seems confusing, overwhelming and self-destructive, God is my (and the world’s) sustainer and ultimate Redeemer.

Cooking gives me an outlet for creative expression that is inspired by God’s creativity.

As I have gone through adulthood, I have found freedom in the creative prerogative I take with my kitchen and garden. I’ve always thought of there being two main kinds of cooks in a kitchen. One is a scientist who sees a recipe as an experiment with predictable results to be recreated by following the exact directions. The other is an artist who sees a recipe as a jumping off point into all the what if’s of ingredients. I am without a doubt the latter. A recipe is never off-limits to interpretation and modification. The downside is that I can hardly re-create the same dish twice. This, of course is no issue when something turns out so unappealing there is no hope in modification, but when I manage to make a coconut curry with just the right balance of sweet to spicy but didn’t measure how many chilis I put in, there is a sense of loss in the fact that I will never enjoy that exact same meal again. I wonder if God ever thinks similar things about his creation. Or, if in the beginning some of his own recipes were beyond modification? Whatever the case, the world is exploding with the creativity of God. When I experience a perfectly ripe pear that melts in my mouth or the first tender spear of asparagus poking through the ground in spring or a poached egg that oozes over my toast, good food never fails to inspire me to praise God for all his blessings. I often say that I love people by feeding them. How much more then does God love and bless me by having poured so much creativity into the food he designed for me to, not just live on, but to truly be inspired by?

God has also used kitchens and gardens to give me glimpses of insight into his plan for salvation.

I lived a very protected life as a child in a small farming community. My family, my eight classmates and my two imaginary friends were pretty much my circle of influence. My life was ordered around egg salad sandwiches wrapped in waxed paper for school, roast beef and yorkshire pudding Sunday lunches, and as big a piece of chocolate cake to end Sunday faspa as I wanted. I felt safe and protected and I never wanted anything to change. And though my mom was an outstanding baker, either she relished an easy and consistent weekly menu plan or she loved us enough to sacrifice her culinary creativity for making what her children would enjoy eating. Then, in my teens, my mom died and food and life got a lot more complicated. I immediately lost my footing and I have never been as grounded in this life since. By default being the only girl left in the house, I became mostly responsible for the cooking. I don’t remember being resentful about that, and in hindsight I think I wanted to do it as a way of honouring my mom. And, in the meantime, while folding egg whites into waffle batter or rolling pie dough on the bright red arborite counters of my childhood home, the seeds of curiosity about heaven—with my mom now there, it’s relationship to the earth—where I still lived, and Christ—who was The Way between those two, were planted.

Now jump ahead a few decades when I was reminded that sacrifice is intrinsic to salvation and the real life Christ calls me to.

Not many weeks ago, I stood in my garden on one of those days that makes me just plain glad to be alive. Yes, I had things to worry over and lists to check things off of and heartaches to pray for but the sun was so warm and the sky so blue and the maple trees so brilliant that for just a few moments I stood in silence soaking in God’s love for me through the world he created. At the same time, because I was standing in my garden, my thoughts turned quickly from those far-away reminders, to the things around my feet: the lettuce gone to seed, the beans drying on their stalks, and even one of my favourite parts of the garden - the compost pile. Harvest, in the past, has traditionally been a time of great joy and thanksgiving. But having a yard to tend to and a garden to put away for the winter has turned harvest time a touch more melancholy; more bittersweet. Every autumn I am reminded that everything that lives and grows in order to nourish our own bodies - whether its pigs, apples, kale or wheat - must die to do so. In some stages of my life, thoughts of death have brought distress and fear, but the beautiful morning in my garden renewed a hope and anticipation in living in the assurance of Christ’s plan for my own resurrection into real life. These moments where I have stopped to pay attention to seasons of my garden have pointed quite tangibly to Christ’s sacrifice of his own human life. A tomato seed, of negligible weight, can grow into a vine which produces much fruit That fruit, when taken from the vine, although it dies, then turns into the most delectable bruschetta which feeds my body and my senses. When I choose to slow down and reflect on the seasons of planting and harvest, it brings to remembrance how - through his life and death - Christ provides us with the gift of sacrifice and salvation.

Finally, I’ll share one last thought on how eating a fish helps me find some clarity of thought.

A good friend of mine and I often exchange books at Christmas. We both share a love of food that goes beyond what food tastes like and sits more in the place of what food means to me and for me. So, this is not often a typical cookbook exchange. A couple of years ago I chose my gift pretty much solely on
its cover: *An Everlasting Meal* is its title, and after reading it my friend lent it back to me so I could read it. The premise of the book is how to make use of what you have and basically to not waste *anything*. The sparse recipes scattered through the book included broth made from carrot tops and celery leaves and how to make use of burnt toast.

The author, Tamar Adler, could make you salivate over what you thought was only good for the garbage! She has inspired me to value all life by making the most of what we are given. A paring knife can make good use of “ugly” vegetables. A chicken carcass, after providing a family with dinner and several lunches of leftovers, can be used for soup. Stale bread can be turned into bread pudding.

One small paragraph in the chapter on fish was very touching. Meats is one area that I have been especially focused on to try to be a more thoughtful consumer. Tamar tells a story of how she tries to bring honour to the animals that give up their lives for her.

And so when she sits down to eat fish she looks it in the eye and acknowledges the life it once had and is now sharing with her. These are her words:

Serve a fish whole; gleaming and ready, on its own platter, with some acknowledgment of its silvery skin, crisp tail, single, reminding glassy eye. Leave the head on, so that you get a chance to regard the fish as she regards you, and there’s a proper ceremony to the exchange.

Eating animals “whole” is not a natural inclination of mine as I hypocritically like to keep the chicken breast on my plate tidily removed from the fact that it was part of a live chicken at some point. But Tamar has inspired me to eat fish in this slow and ceremonious way. Pausing after grace - and looking a fish in its stoically reminding eye - before eating it, helps me see the interconnectedness of all creation and how food is an avenue for me to not simply make use the earth but also just as importantly, to cherish it, and its resources as an act of worshipping the Creator who made them.

This is real: that God lavished us - his whole creation - with infinite, creative, sacrificial love.

And if the heady taste of my freshly dug baby potatoes, boiled until tender, and slathered in salty butter can be a reminder of that, then I guess food isn’t so mundane after all.

**Endnotes**

1. Part of the history lectures sponsored by the EastMenn Historical Committee of the Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society and the Mennonite Heritage Village and given on May 6, 2017 in Steinbach, Manitoba.

Immigrant Cooking in Mexico: The Mennonite Kitchens of Chihuahua

By Karen Hursh Graber


Mexican Kitchen

In recent years, immigration has become a topic of intense focus, not only in the United States and Mexico, but worldwide. Although generally seen as a political question, there is no doubt that the movement of immigrants also falls into the cultural realm, of which cuisine is a significant part. Much of the history of the world reflects culinary interchange, from Alexander the Great’s expedition to India that brought rice to Europe, to the Europeans’ trans-Atlantic quest for spices, which led to the discovery and colonization of the Americas.

What is known today as Mexican cooking is generally considered to be a fusion of pre-Hispanic techniques and ingredients with those of the Spanish colonists. (Spanish cuisine was itself a fusion of European and Arabic before it even reached Mexico’s shores.) The French influence on Mexico’s cooking during the Porfiriato era was also important. However, several other groups, many of them early twentieth-century-immigrants to Mexico, contributed dishes that are now part of the national culinary repertoire.

The tacos árabes and tacos al pastor of the Lebanese and the Chihuahua cheese and sopaipillas (rollkuchen, eds.) of the Mennonites, along with the contributions of Italians, Welsh and other immigrant groups, form part of Mexico’s gastronomic identity. These dishes have come to be considered Mexican rather than “foreign” or “international.”

[...] For most Mexicans, the Mennonites are tall, light-skinned people, dressed in overalls, who produce their famous cheese. They are seen in several Mexican cities, including the capital, selling their cheese, butter and cookies from grocery carts to eager buyers. But where do they come from and how do they live?

The Mennonites are a religious group that has preserved its cultural identity nearly intact since its formation at the end of the 16th century in what is now Holland and Germany. Their lives are structured around their religious beliefs, which include non-participation in government and conscientious objection to service in the armed forces. Persecuted because of their beliefs, they dispersed throughout Europe, particularly Russia, and later to Canada.

In 1920-22, a group of Mennonites migrated from Canada to Mexico at the invitation of President Álvaro Obregón, who recognized their agricultural skills. They settled on the land that had formed the Hacienda de Bustillos, which had been founded in Chihuahua in 1868. Some Mennonite colonies were founded in other parts of Mexico, including Yucatán and Campeche, but the Chihuahua settlements, concentrated around the town of Cuauhtémoc, were the most numerous and longest-lasting. [...] After so many migrations, it would be easy to assume that the culture of the Mennonites had changed, but their religious tenets and Lowland Dutch language remained intact. Their cooking, however, while retaining many of its Dutch-German characteristics, had been influenced by that of Russia and was to become further influenced by Mexican techniques and ingredients.

The production on their farms of such Mexican ingredients as beans, chiles and tomatillos had a significant impact on the dietary habits of the Chihuahua Mennonites, who were producing record crops of corn and beans by 1935 and including...
Mexican staples, such as chiles and tortillas, in their everyday menus. An important culinary exchange started to take place between the Mennonites and the other inhabitants of the region. The hearty European soups that played a significant part in Mennonite gastronomy began to be flavored with the local chiles, and the cuisine of Chihuahua was greatly enriched by the Mennonite cheese, called queso menonita and, later, queso chihuahua. This pale yellow cheese, now duplicated in other parts of Mexico in versions ranging from mild to sharp, is still considered a specialty of the region, where the best Chihuahua cheese is found.

The farming lifestyle of Mexico’s Mennonites has not changed drastically since their initial migration, and continues to be centered on the fields, orchards and kitchen, making it food-centered, in both domestic and commercial terms. Due to Chihuahua’s extreme climate, with a more marked difference between summer and winter than found in other parts of the country, there is only one harvest season. Everything needed for the rest of the year is either canned, dried or preserved for winter.

Each family grows its own vegetables, including tomatoes, carrots, cucumbers, cabbage, potatoes, corn, beans and herbs. There are also family orchards, with cherries, pears, apricots, peaches, plums, and the famous Chihuahua apples, a specialty of the Mennonites. Some continue to use plow horses to work the fields of wheat, beans, corn and oats, although the modern Mennonites, who live in the same communities as the Old Colony groups, now use tractors. (Many of them are also now bilingual and conduct business in Spanish as well as Lowland Dutch [Low German, eds]) A number of these families also choose to use electricity, replacing part of the canning chores with freezing.

Every family has at least one cow that produces the milk, cream and butter for daily use, as well as chickens for meat and eggs. Pigs are primarily raised for home-cured hams, cold cuts and bacon. The homemade garlic beef sausage has become popular in the region, where people know that the Mennonite products are made from all local ingredients, using traditional methods.

While the Mennonite dairy industry has been largely modernized, the cooking, canning and preserving recipes and techniques have been passed down and remain nearly the same as they were when the group first arrived in Mexico, as have the home kitchens. The description of a contemporary kitchen in Recetario Menonita de Chihuahua (part of the Indigenous and Popular Cooking Series of CONACULTA, Mexico’s National Council for Culture and the Arts) reads like something from a hundred years ago:

Large, simple, painted white, and unadorned except for a clock and a calendar, the kitchen centers around a large wooden table with benches on either side. Cooking utensils are like those seen in rural kitchens throughout Mexico, with huge clay pots and wooden spoons and spatulas in every size imaginable. Something that sets the Mennonite kitchen apart from those found in other homes is the traditional churn, still used to produce butter for home use, apart from the commercially sold product, and the hand-carved wooden butter molds.

The kitchen, at the center of the house, opens onto the granary [pantry, eds.] on one side and the bedrooms on the other, and is the hub of domestic activity. Although modern life and its influences on young people threaten the Mennonite social structure, meal preparation and food preservation still
require family participation. Meals are served family-style, from large bowls and platters brought to the table at the same time, rather than the pre-plated course-by-course servings customary in most Mexican homes.

Food and its production, preparation, serving and dining customs shed light on human beings as a whole, and cultural and ethnic groups in particular. For the Mennonites, as with immigrant groups everywhere, it serves as a way of connecting with the ancestors.

For simple home cooking with a Mexican touch, the food of the Chihuahua Mennonites, with its hearty soups, seems particularly suited to the winter season. Their addition of chiles to these European soups adds depth of flavor and a pleasant warmth. The recipes below are easy, satisfying and perfect for family meals or large gatherings.

Endnotes

1 The three and a half decades of the Porfirio Díaz presidency (1876-1880 and 1884-1911) are often referred to as “the Porfiriato.” These years were characterized by modernizing policies and the opening of the country to foreign investment. Díaz sought to bring French architecture and esthetics to Mexico, even though he had fought against the French in the War of the French Intervention in 1862. Editors.

**Tomates Verdes Encurtidos: Sweet and Sour Tomatillo Conserve**

Visually, these remind me of the pickled green tomatoes that are nearly always on the table in New York’s kosher delis. But the sweet-and-sour vinaigrette, with the addition of green chiles, makes them very much a unique product of Chihuahua Mennonite kitchens. Chilacas are long, fresh green chiles, mild to medium hot, commonly found in northern and western Mexico. When dried, they are called pasillas, a name that is sometimes, confusingly, used to refer to the fresh chiles.

**Ingredients:**

- 1 pound chilaca chiles (or substitute Anaheim or mild, fresh New Mexican green chiles)
- 1 onion, sliced
- 2 ½ cups apple vinegar
- 3 cups sugar
- 2 tablespoons pickling spices (or use a mixture of crushed bay leaves, whole allspice and whole black peppercorns)
- 2 pounds tomatillos, husks removed

**Preparation:**

Place all ingredients except the tomatillos in a stainless steel, enamel, or other non-reactive pot. Bring to a boil, lower heat, and cook until the chiles are almost tender. Add the tomatillos and cook until tender but not mushy. Ladle into sterilized jars and seal.

If storing outside the refrigerator, follow manufacturer’s directions for proper sealing of canning jars. If storing in the refrigerator, the preserves will keep for several months. Makes about 2 quarts.

**Sopaipillas: Puffy Fried Bread**

Sopaipillas, a classic northern Mexican treat, resemble Southwestern fry bread. They can be served with honey, jam, or fruit sauces, but they should always be served hot. A dusting of powdered sugar would also be good. This recipe is adapted from the Sunset Mexican Cookbook.

**Ingredients:**

- 4 cups flour
- 1 ¼ teaspoon salt
- 3 teaspoons baking powder
- 3 tablespoons sugar
- 2 tablespoons shortening
- 1 ¼ cups milk
- vegetable oil for frying

**Preparation:**

In a large bowl, combine the flour, salt, baking powder and sugar. Using a pastry blender or two knives, cut in the shortening until it resembles coarse corn meal or small peas.

Add milk to form a soft dough, just firm enough to roll. On a lightly floured surface, roll out the dough to a thickness of ¼” and cut into diamond shapes.

Pour oil to a depth of 1 inch in a frying pan, heat to about 375° and fry the sopaipillas on both sides, turning once so that they puff up. Turn a second time to brown evenly and remove to paper towels to drain.

Serve with honey or the topping of your choice. Makes about 4 dozen.

**Caldo Ruso de Res: Russian-Mexican Beef Soup**

Russian-Mexican beef soup is obviously a holdover from the Mennonites’ days as grain farmers in the Ukraine, with the distinctly Mexican additions of chile and tomato. The original recipe calls for the cut of beef called chamorro, or shanks, which provides a much richer taste than other cuts for soups. Use bone-in beef shanks because, like the Italian osso bucco, this recipe gets a lot of its character from the marrow at the center of the crosscut shanks.

**Ingredients:**

- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 2 pounds meaty, bone-in beef shanks
- 3 stalks celery, chopped
- 3 medium carrots, chopped
- 1 large onion, chopped
- 2 chiles de arbol or other small, dried red chiles
- 2 bay leaves
- 8 sprigs parsley
- 8 peppercorns
Caldo de Albóndigas: Chihuahua Mennonite Meatball Soup

This meat-and-potatoes soup, along with a salad and bread or bolillos, could easily serve as a main meal. A friend who has to watch cholesterol makes the meatballs with ground chicken and uses half and half instead of cream.

**Ingredients:**
- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil
- 1 tablespoon butter
- 1 medium onion, chopped
- 1-2 chiles de arbol or other small, dried red chiles
- 3 quarts good quality beef or chicken stock
- ½ pound chard or spinach, washed and cut into ½ « strips
- 4 medium white potatoes, peeled and cut into 1” cubes
- 8 black peppercorns
- 4 bay leaves
- ½ cup heavy cream or half and half, scalded

**For the meatballs:**
- 1 pound ground beef
- 1 egg
- ¼ cup finely minced or grated onion
- ½ cup breadcrumbs
- 2 tablespoons chopped parsley
- salt and pepper to taste

**Preparation:**
Heat the oil and butter in a stockpot or Dutch oven, add the chopped onion and stir until onion begins to wilt. Add the chile and cook, stirring, another minute. Add stock, bring to boil and add chard, potatoes, peppercorns and bay leaves. While the vegetables are cooking, combine all meatball ingredients in a bowl, and form ¾ “meatballs. When the vegetables are nearly tender, add the meatballs to the pot, reduce heat and simmer until they are cooked through. (They will float on the surface.) Just before serving, stir in the cream.

Serves 4 as a main course, 6 as a first course.

Mennonite History for Young People

A series of education materials published by the D. F. Plett Historical Research Foundation telling the story of the 1870s Mennonites who migrated to Mexico and Paraguay in the 1920s.

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Pig Killing¹

By Arnold Dyck†

The boys rather liked the old ones during pig-killing, because at that time they were always strangely well disposed, even exuberant. Not the least reason for [this] was the custom of “taking stock of the bacon.” The master of the house would make the rounds with a bottle of brandy and a small glass from time to time, in order to strengthen his neighbours. This strengthening went on all day, not very frequently, but frequently enough to keep everybody strong and in [a] good mood. In their high spirits and good humor they fooled each other and did such things as hang pigtails on each other. The boys, who died laughing at the old men, so awfully respectable at other times, caught their happy mood.

When Hans returns home [from school] at four he finds things in high gear. Cracklings are cooking in the two big cauldrons. One of the Tanten stands before them stirring with a long oar like ladle other women tend to the stuffing of sausages in the rear room. Berend works the lever of the sausage machine. …

In the summer room the hams are being treated with salt. That is men's work. But the men don't really enjoy the work anymore and finally announce that Martin will manage the rest, ‘the rest’ meaning a considerable pile. They wash their hands in steaming hot water, clean and dry their butcher knives, which they wrap carefully in a cloth, and after relishing a final Schnaps, or ‘food for the soul,’ they withdraw to the corner room. There they sit and smoke, and spit into the spittoon with the white sand in it, standing between them on the floor. They feel quite satisfied now that the time for smoking and spitting has arrived. The day’s work for them is finished.

They still talk about the pigs—how much lard they may have yielded, that the second one really should have been weighed, and where else there had been heavy pigs.

Endnotes
It is remarkable how food remains a potent memory of ethnic identity. Even when other markers of being Mennonite fade away, either through intermarriage, a change in faith, or religious identities, Mennonite foodways are often maintained or rediscovered. A smattering of internet blogs and food websites reference their contributor’s debts to their Mennonite grandmothers’ recipes, and often offer warm childhood memories of family gatherings, dinner at Grandma’s, and the sometimes humorous and awkward attempts to have non-Mennonite partners enjoy the ‘comfort’ foods of the past. Prominent in these memories is the place of the Mennonite Treasury of Recipes, published by the Ebenezer Nähverein of the Steinbach Mennonite Church to record recipes used to serve the large numbers that attended Church conferences. Its lasting legacy would be the many traditional Russian Mennonite family recipes that were included. It was first published in 1961 and by the mid 1980s had gone through thirteen printings and sold 42,000 copies.

The short articles that follow are a variety of memories and musings about Mennonite food.

Preserving Grandpa

By Robyn Sneath, Brandon, Manitoba

When I think of Mennonite stories involving food, I automatically think of women in the kitchen. Grandmothers, mothers and daughters working together, aprons tied around ample waists and work-worn hands kneading dough while children tug at skirts. The summer sun shines through home sewn curtains catching flies in its haze of light. The bounty of the backyard garden sits piled high on the counter, waiting to be chopped, dried, or preserved into edible treasures that will be savoured throughout the year. I can smell the yeasty warm smell of the dough rising, tucked in its tea-towel-covered bowl. There’s something so wholesome about this image that it makes my heart ache for this time. Except that this is not my memory, and this is not that story.

This Mennonite food story isn’t about women or the fellowship of cooking together. This isn’t the Mennonite Girls Can Cook variety of food and faith. It’s about a man, when I knew him, an old man, my grandfather, a lapsed Mennonite, finding a connection to his roots through the dishes of his childhood. The dishes in question here are German pancakes (known to the rest of the world as crepes), and Rollkuchen, two alchemistic combinations of flour and fat. My grandfather was not a cook per se, and other than manning the backyard grill, these were his only exploits in the kitchen that I can recall. A few times a year we would get an invitation to supper and my parents and brothers and I would hop on our bikes and ride to our grandparents’ house ten doors down.

My grandfather, Jake Dyck, left the Manitoba Colony in Mexico as a young man in the 1930s, turning his back on his family and their faith. He drove truck in the nearby mines and lived a life that would be considered wild even by today’s standards. I know only snippets and slivers of this life, stories that are whispered and never spoken all the way out loud. By the 1950s he had wearied of his wayward ways and decided on a fresh start in Canada. That fresh start took the form of a farm in Southwestern Manitoba and a petite Pentecostal girl named Amy, thirteen years his junior, whom he married after five dates. Together they made a life: raised a son and daughter, built a trucking business, ushered at the same door in church for decades, and spent their winters in Arizona. By any measure, his life was a success. And yet, in some ways, he was a man unmoored. The only vestiges of his roots were in the way he pronounced the word ‘children’ as ‘shildren,’ the occasional Low German phone call to his beloved sister ‘Tante Tin’ and in the semiannual preparation of Rollkuchen and German pancakes.

Rollkuchen, for us, was the dish of summer, and was best eaten outside accompanied by copious amounts of watermelon (arbus being one of three Low German words I knew growing up, the others being faspa and oinjabecksen). My grandfather oversaw the operation and my grandmother was his faithful helper, bustling around doing as she was told. It’s my understanding that each family differs slightly in its interpretation
of acceptable toppings for this crispy, hot, tender delicacy. I’ve even heard of some families using ketchup as a topping, and while I usually think myself open-minded, this strikes me as sacrilege, a violation of something sacred. In our family, appropriate condiments consisted of whatever jam or jelly was on hand, or honey. It seems to me that the shape of the Rollkuchen also varies by family—in ours they were long and narrow with a slit down the middle so the dough could be tucked through; I can picture clearly the steam escaping as I snapped piece after piece in half, hot honey running down my fingers. There was always something festive about these occasions; even as children we knew there was something special in this meal. That is why years later I was so perplexed when, as a new young wife, I served this delicacy to my ‘English’ husband and he refused to accept that fried dough and watermelon constituted a proper supper.

German pancakes, on the other hand, could be enjoyed throughout the year and, like Rollkuchen, they were served for supper, with piles of bacon replacing the ubiquitous watermelon. These family suppers were eaten at the kitchen table, never the dining room. In fact, I’m not sure that I ever sat at the dining room table in my grandparents’ home—it was the table for the ‘grown-ups’ and we, the children, ate at the kitchen table, even into our twenties.

These dinners were occasions of both fear and delight. The delight part is obvious—delicious stacks of warm crepes, covered in sugar, served with crisp bacon. There were two stacks from which to choose—the sugar stack, covered in white sugar when the crepe was hot so the sugar would melt, or the plain stack, which we’d then cover with pancake syrup, roll up, and cut into bite-sized pieces. Now, the reason for the fear was less obvious; it stemmed from my Grandfather’s expectation that we consume what to us seemed like an obscene number of these pancakes. Anything less was taken as a personal affront, as if we were rejecting not only his cooking, but his culture. We—my brothers and I—would joke about the need to prepare ourselves mentally for the experience of eating far more than we felt capable of. My grandparents were children of the Depression, evidenced by the stack of neatly folded reused paper serviettes on their table. Their entreaties to eat more struck me as tied to their own times of want—their ability to be generous with their children and children’s children a sign that God had blessed them and brought them through the wilderness.

My grandfather passed away in 2006 and he took his recipes with him. My grandmother died years later from a dementia-induced hunger strike. I don’t even know if these dishes were recreated from memory, or if the recipes were written down somewhere. It didn’t ever occur to me to ask. I never stood next to him, watching his old trucker’s hands knead and roll and cut, and I don’t know if he learned by watching his own mother or if he learned later in life as a way to connect with his past, with the tastes and smells of a life left behind.

My mother—my grandfather’s English/Dutch daughter-in-law—has taken up the tradition of the Rollkuchen, with a recipe culled from the internet. Every few summers she’ll set up a fryer outside when the whole family is at the lake, and with small children tugging at her pantleg, she recreates the dish from a past she’s never known while everyone else worries about kids being too close to hot oil. Alongside the watermelon she now serves barbecued farmer sausage, perhaps to convince my husband that fried dough is indeed an acceptable meal. I’m ashamed to admit that my own small children have no real sense of their Mennonite-ness, that I haven’t yet recreated these dishes for them, although I suspect it’s never too late to start. Maybe this weekend.
Ten Epic Mennonite Dishes We Wish Were Real

By Andrew J. Bergman

This article originally appeared on the blog “The Daily Bonnet” at http://dailybonnet.com/ten-epic-mennonite-dishes-wish-real/. Used with permission.

For the most part, Mennonite cuisine, like the people who cook it, remains rather slow to change. While some variations on classic recipes have been attempted (such as MJ’s Mennonite poutine), for the most part these dishes have remained the same for decades. Here are some Mennonite dishes we desperately want to try!

Mennonite Turducken
The classic American thanksgiving dish, which is a chicken stuffed in a duck, stuffed in a turkey, could be given a Mennonite twist. Let’s try bacon-wrapped formavorscht enveloped in a thick layer of klopps.

Gourmet Kielke and Cheese
Homemade macaroni and cheese can be nice, but why not try a Mennonite variation. Get rid of boring macaroni and replace it with kielke. Then mix in a combination of Bothwell cheeses.

Rhubarb Ice Cream
These days you can make ice cream out of anything. I love the combination of rhubarb with a bit of sugar. Someone should invent rhubarb ice cream…though, I’m sure someone already has.

Mennonite Double Down
A few years ago Kentucky Fried Chicken introduced a chicken sandwich that got rid of the bread and replaced it with well…chicken. The Mennonite Double Down would have farmer sausage rather than a bun. You can put a piece of fried bologna and cheese inside and make it a sandwich, without the totally useless bread.

Farmer Sausage Tacos
We know that there’s a sizable Mennonite presence in Mexico, but, so far, I’ve never heard of anyone replacing the ground beef of a taco with ground farmer sausage. I, for one, would like to try it.

Borscht Soup Dumplings
A specialty of Shanghai, soup dumplings (also called xiaolongbao) are an amazing Chinese dumpling, filled with soup, that explodes in your mouth when you bite into it. I don’t see why we couldn’t fill them with cabbage or beet borscht.

Cracklings Pizza
Back in the day Grandma used to smear jreewe (cracklings) onto a burnt piece of toast. Why not use it as a pizza topping? I’d love to find this one hot and ready.

Kimchi Vereneki
Kimchi, a fermented cabbage dish from Korea, is all the rage with hipsters these days. Ukrainian variations of perogies already have sauerkraut in them, so I don’t see why we couldn’t have a vereneki stuffed with kimchi.

Mennonite Sushi
Even Mennonites consume this delightful Japanese dish. However, until now we haven’t made sushi our own. How about a maki sushi roll with ham and ruhrei topped with cottage cheese instead of roe. Or, perhaps, a Manitoba pickerel nigiri.

Waffle Sauce Popsicle
The white sauce on MHV waffles is to die for. So, why not freeze it in a popsicle mold for a refreshing summer treat? I’m looking forward to trying this at Steinbach’s Summer in the City in June…if someone has the courage to invent it.

Update: Since this post was originally published in February, 2017 a few inspired Mennonite chefs have gotten a little creative with their dishes. Daily Bonnet readers Timothy Wenger, Stephanie Wenger, Simon Hamm and Emma Hamm, have successfully created most of these dishes! Congrats!

Although not on the list, our friends at PEG Beer Co. created a truly inspired Watermelon and Roll Kuchen burger for Le Burger week in September, 2017. (pictured above).

I’m glad to see Mennonites exploring new and delicious culinary territory!
Mennonite Waffles and White Sauce

By Jody Arsenault

This article originally appeared on the blog “Mommy Moment” at https://www.mommymoment.ca/2013/11/waffles-white-sauce.html. Used with permission.

Waffles are a fun breakfast food or great weeknight supper idea. My grandma passed down a delicious waffles and white sauce for waffles recipe. Waffles and White Sauce is a traditional Mennonite recipe that is a family favorite.

When I wrote on Facebook the other day that we were going to have waffles and white sauce for supper, I did not expect the response I got. So many people had no idea what white sauce for waffles was. I tried to explain it as a homemade type pudding, but then decided I should share our family recipe.

We live in a small city and Mennonite foods are common here – Waffles and White Sauce is a traditional meal here, served for breakfast, lunch or supper. I was always happy when my grandpa would make them in a cast iron waffle iron over a fire. I of course also loved when my grandma or mom would make them in their heart-shaped waffle iron. I do not have a cast iron waffle iron to make them over the fire, or a heart shaped waffle iron, but I still love making them for my family.

Waffles and White Sauce recipes can vary, but they all are quite similar. This is the recipe that my grandma made and that I have hand written in my recipe binder – I’ve been making this favorite recipe for over 10 years!

Waffles Recipe

Ingredients:
• 2 cups flour
• 2 tsp baking powder
• 1/4 tsp salt
• 2 cups milk
• 3 eggs
• 1/4 melted salted butter

Preparation:
1. Mix dry ingredients, beat in all other ingredients until smooth.
2. Pour a scoop of sauce into a greased, hot iron and bake for 3 minutes (or until the timer beeps if your waffle iron has a timer).

White Sauce For Waffles

Waffles and White Sauce is a traditional meal here in Manitoba where I live. This recipe is one that my grandma often made, she said it was also very similar to the recipe that our local Mennonite museum makes for our local Pioneer Days.

Ingredients:
• 4 cups milk
• 3/4 cup sugar
• 1/4 cup cornstarch
• 1 Tbsp butter
• 1 Tbsp vanilla

Preparation:
1. Heat milk till boiling, stirring constantly. Stir in 1/2 a cup of the sugar.
2. Mix the cornstarch with the remainder 1/4 cup sugar and then add that to the hot milk mixture. Keep stirring till it thickens. (You can add more cornstarch to get it to the thickness you like).
3. Add in the butter and vanilla and stir.
4. Pour over waffles (or dip the waffles into the sauce like my little girls do).
Do you have a cookbook memory that shoots you straight back to your childhood? I know I do. It’s *The Mennonite Treasury of Recipes* that held pride of place in my mother’s kitchen all my growing up years and beyond. I was surprised to find that this book, copyrighted in 1962, had three printings in a year and a half.

The original purpose of the recipe collection was to share recipes for “quantity servings” for conferences. My mom was head cook for a Bible camp for native children in Manitoba, Canada, in the late 60s, so these recipes for fifty dozen cookies, lemon pudding for 100, macaroni and cheese for 100, and others must have been very handy for her. At any rate, she made multiple notes in that section—and all others!

The bulk of the 224-page book consists of submitted recipes in many categories from breads to cookies to soups to candy to main dishes to “you name it” from Canadian Mennonite women. Throughout this book my mom handwrote in dozens more recipes she used often. She also taped in recipe cards and food articles clipped from newspapers. She liberally wrote in the margins, declaring some foods delicious while others were marked with an x. Most pages show flour, egg, or butter spatters. This Mennonite Treasury was treasured indeed!

The editorial committee also created a chapter with traditional Mennonite recipes from Russia, where this religious group spent many decades before coming to Canada in the 1800s. This chapter was included as a history lesson, as in the 60s processed foods were already creeping into Mennonite homes and recipes. The collaborators couldn’t think why anyone would go back to the old ways! The book’s introduction says, “Many of these (recipes) hail back from the days of want and austerity, and are no longer in use, but may be of interest for coming generations. . .”

My mom died in 2010, and one of the things that came to my house after that was her *Mennonite Treasury*. Not long after, a friend from church, sharing my Mennonite heritage, asked if I remembered Plumi Moos. Immediately I was a small child with long braids and wearing a dress and stockings. It was Sunday late afternoon, and a meal called Faspa was on the table. This light meal consisted of buns, meat, cheese, pickles, and a large bowl of Plumi Moos (pronounced PLOOmeh moose).

I hadn’t thought of this traditional fruit soup in a long time, but I knew where to go to find out how to make it! Only, which one of the half dozen recipes had my mom used? None of them looked exactly right. I contacted several of my cousins and got their mothers’ versions. I still wasn’t certain any of these matched my memories.

Eventually I blended several ideas and made my own version, using half a cup each of three kinds of dried fruit and simmering them in 2.5 cups of water until they were soft. Then I sweetened to taste using honey and added a dash of cinnamon and cloves. I mixed 2 tablespoons of cornstarch with 2 cups of milk and added to thicken the moos. Served chilled, this has become a favorite breakfast in my home.

Truly this *Mennonite Treasury of Recipes* has a treasured place of honor in my kitchen, a treasure that can be handed down to my daughter and her daughters after her.
The Manitoba Food History Project: Coming Soon to Steinbach

By Janis Thiessen, Winnipeg, Manitoba

Four historians at the University of Winnipeg are launching a new and innovative research project this fall: the Manitoba Food History Project.

The goal of the project, led by Janis Thiessen, an Associate Professor of History and Associate Director of the Oral History Center at the University of Winnipeg and her associates, Kimberley Moore, Kent Davies, and Sarah Story, is to produce a comprehensive history of food manufacturing, production, retailing, and consumption in the province of Manitoba from its creation in 1870 to the present day. The two driving questions behind the research are “How has food been produced, sold, and consumed in Manitoba?” and “How has this changed over time?” Steinbach will be one of three locations initially targeted by the project (the other two are Winnipeg and Grandview Municipality).

Food history provides a familiar entry point into more complex historical subjects and questions of migration, identity, gender, ethnicity, politics, and health (among others). The Manitoba Food History project will therefore not only contribute to our understanding of the history of food in Manitoba, but the history of Manitoba as a whole. As historians Susan Levine and Steve Striffler observe,

food and work together raise significant questions about the industrial imaginary, gender and labor, the hidden nature of reproductive labor, the history of markets, and the relationship between agricultural and industrial labor. We clearly need more histories of the food industry – not only farm workers and migrant labor or meatpacking and poultry plants but the giant food processing, distribution, and retail industries that took form during the twentieth century.¹

Food and beverage processing is the largest manufacturing industry in Canada, both by percentage of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and by number of jobs; this holds true in Manitoba as well.² The Canadian agriculture and agri-food system accounts for 6.6% of Canada’s GDP, and is responsible for one in eight jobs in Canada.³ Canada is the fifth largest exporter of agriculture and agri-food products in the world. Food and beverage processing is growing, with Canada’s shipment value almost doubling in the past two decades. In Manitoba, food manufacturing sales have more than doubled in that same time period.⁴ A quarter of total manufacturing in Manitoba is produced by the food processing sector, and one in eleven jobs in the province are dependent on agriculture and related industries.⁵

The majority of work in food history draws almost exclusively on written sources. “The voices and life experiences of most food workers (both domestic and professional) are hidden, apart from the minority who wrote cookbooks or memoirs.” Nor is much attention given to the role of producers in food history. Polly Russell notes, for example, that “the changes in food production systems that characterize contemporary food production have been little documented, particularly from the perspective of food producers.”⁶ The Manitoba Food History Project’s emphasis on oral history with food producers, gathered via the University of Winnipeg Oral History Centre Food History Truck, is an innovative solution to this problem.

A key component of the research project is the creation and use of the UW OHC Food History Truck. Combining the strengths of the Philadelphia Public History Truck, the StoryCorps MobileBooth, and the contemporary food truck phenomenon, the UW OHC Food History Truck will travel the province, recording Manitobans cooking local, historical, traditional recipes in the truck while the researchers conduct oral history interviews with them.

The researchers plan to conduct approximately one hundred oral history interviews (sixty in Winnipeg; twenty each in Steinbach and Grandview Municipality). Some of these will be recorded on the UW OHC Food History Truck, while others will be recorded at restaurants, farms, and other locations of relevance. Those interviewed will be asked a series of questions, including:

- What are your earliest memories of eating the recipe you are preparing for us on the UW OHC Food History Truck?
• What memories do you have of your parents eating or serving this recipe?
• How has your use of this recipe changed over time?
• In what ways is the recipe you are preparing for us on the UW OHC Food History Truck distinctly Manitoban? To what extent does that matter to you?
• What have been the critical issues faced by the Manitoba agri-food industry, in your opinion?
• How did you become involved in the agri-food industry?
• How has your business changed over time?
• What have been the critical issues faced by people in your industry, in your opinion?
• What were the most significant changes in the history of your business? What made them significant?
• How has/have your product(s) changed over time?
• How have your relationships with suppliers changed over time?
• How has advertising in your industry changed over time?
• Describe your job: what is a typical work day for you?
• What gave you the most satisfaction in your work experience(s)? What did you learn from these experiences?
• Were you ever frustrated by, or experience any conflict with, your work experience(s)? How was it resolved?
• How did you feel about and what was your involvement in [various events, such as changes in company ownership or product lines]?

These oral history interviews, together with archival research, will be used to create a number of free, publicly-accessible resources that will broaden knowledge and understanding of the agri-food system in Manitoba and of Manitoba history more generally. These resources include a project website; a podcast series; a traveling digital exhibit; digital audio walking tours; and a cookbook. The open access, interactive website will include digital maps, archival documents, and oral history interviews excerpts. Life history interviews will be archived at the Oral History Centre, with excerpts published on the project website and in the Oral History Centre Cookbook. Podcasts will be made available on both the project website and the Oral History Centre website. An interactive digital exhibit of archival photos and oral history excerpts, modelled on Audio Postcards Canada, will be created by and displayed in various public locations in Manitoba. Undergraduate and graduate students in food history courses at the University of Winnipeg will conduct oral histories on the UW OHC Food History Truck, and publish their findings on the website and travelling digital exhibit. Biographies of historic individuals in Manitoba food production and retailing will be published on the Manitoba Historical Society’s “Memorable Manitobans” website.

Key features of the digital maps on the project website will include:

- the ability to zoom in on particular towns/cities;
- place markers to indicate location of past and present food manufacturers, food retailers, food distributors, restaurants, food security organizations, and farmers markets;
- ability to filter these place markers by time period, type (e.g., retailers vs. restaurants), and ownership structure (e.g., independent, chain, or cooperative);
- ability to click on place markers to reveal further place-specific content (e.g., archival and current photos, audio clips from oral history interviews and soundscapes, newspaper articles, archival material);
- ability of general public to add material (e.g., accounts of personal experiences as former customers or employees);
- ability to search digital map by particular food type (e.g., search for “perogy” turns up manufacturers, retailers, restaurants, etc. that make or sell that item);
- the mapping of networks between organizations and business owners.

The project website will be of tremendous practical benefit to individuals and corporations working in agri-food industries, to individuals and organizations working in food security, to private citizens interested in food and food history, and to academics interested in food studies.

Steinbach was chosen as one of the key sites for this research project, as it includes the histories of six different ethnic groups with strong food traditions: Indigenous peoples, Mennonites, Ukrainians, Germans, French, and British. Farmers, hog producers, cheesemakers, chicken hatcheries, perogy makers, restaurants operators, and others form part of the interesting diversity of food producers in this region.

Some of the questions that people from Steinbach might want to respond to include:

- Were you one of the original contributors to the “Steinbach cookbook” – The Mennonite Treasury of Recipes?
- Did you work for years producing glums koake in the kitchen at MJ’s Kafé?
- Did you make the borscht at the Livery Barn Restaurant?
- Has Uncle Jake’s Restaurant been your traditional meeting place with friends for decades?
- Are you the founder of Lee’s Village Restaurant?
- Did you butcher hogs at the Mennonite Heritage Village?
- Are you the former head cook at Pete’s Inn?
- Did you provide the recipe for the waffle sauce during Pioneer Days?
- Did you own Not Edgar’s?
- Was happy hour at the Frantz Inn a Friday ritual for your coworkers?
- Did you retire from a long career at the Steinbach Hatchery?
We want to interview long-time customers, workers, managers, and owners of these and other food-related businesses in Steinbach, including The Country Perogy Shop, Nature’s Farm, and Country Meats. We’re interested in farmers in the immediate area around Steinbach as well.

Or maybe you have a recipe to share? If there’s a longstanding food tradition in your family, we invite you to come cook with us! Hop aboard the UW OHC Food History Truck with your bag of groceries. We’ll interview you while you cook a recipe that has meaning for you. Keep an eye out for the UW OHC Food History Truck at the Mennonite Heritage Village in Steinbach next summer!

Endnotes

Whose Land? Conflict between Colonies and Ejidos in the Mexican State of Chihuahua

By Rebecca Janzen, Columbia, South Carolina

Mennonite colonies in Mexico have had several conflicts about land with their neighbours, especially with ejidos. Ejidos are land that the Mexican government has granted to groups of primarily indigenous campesinos [peasants]. Few people in Mexico, regardless of their religious affiliation, have an adequate understanding of conflicts between ejidos and other landowners. If people in Mexico know about these conflicts at all, they typically believe that these conflicts took place only in the first decades after the Mexican Revolution, which officially ended with a 1917 Constitution; this time period coincided with the first decades of Mennonite settlement in Mexico. These were not, however, the only conflicts. Indeed, last year’s Preservings reviewed Peter Bergen’s La Honda: 50 Jahre, and the review highlighted Bergen’s explanation of some of that colony’s struggles with land in the 1970s and 1980s.1 Others, like geographer Harry Leonard Sawatzky, have gone into significant detail about agraristas [agrarianists in favour of land reform] and their interaction with Mennonites in the state of Chihuahua in the 1940s and 1950s.2 I wanted to learn more about these conflicts after reading Bergen and Sawatzky’s work. To learn more about them, I visited several archives in Mexico City. This article reflects...
on some of the archival sources I found. It explains how ejidos started in Mexico, how Mennonite colonies fit into the Mexican government’s timeline for land reform, and how Mennonites in Chihuahua have interacted with the ejido system. I share examples that show that in some situations, the Mennonites’ land was redistributed, at other times, they chose to reframe redistribution as a donation, and on one occasion, an older Mennonite man deeded part of his land to his daughters to avoid redistribution altogether.

What is an Ejido?

Land and land use were contentious issues in Mexico long before the Mennonites settled in the states of Chihuahua and Durango in the 1920s. In fact, land was one of the main reasons the Mexican Revolution began in 1910. This was because in Mexico some people owned very large amounts of land, called haciendas or fincas, which functioned like plantations. One of these haciendas, owned by the Russek family, is today the Ojo de la Yegua (Nordkolonie), Santa Rita and Santa Clara colonies, as well as other surrounding land. The Russeks and other landowners in Mexico then hired people to work the land on their behalf and these labourers typically sharecropped or received minimal pay for their work.

The first laws that reformed this hacienda system were implemented in 1915. In January of that year, then-president Venustiano Carranza observed that the hacienda system suppressed indigenous people’s communal landholding practices.3

Fransisco (‘Pancho’) Villa was one of the leaders of the Mexican Revolution. He was active in northern Mexico, which included the state of Chihuahua, where Mennonites originally settled in 1922. Source: Wikipedia Commons.

The archivist at the Agrarian Archives in Mexico City examines a map of Colonia Juarez. Photo credit: Rebecca Janzen.
Two years later, in 1917, the Revolutionary government approved a new Constitution. Its 27th article stated: “La propiedad de las tierras y aguas comprendidas dentro de los límites del territorio nacional, corresponde originariamente a la Nación” [Land and water that are found within national borders, originally belong to the Nation]. This article highlights that the Mexican Nation has an inalienable dominion over the land within its borders and implies that landowners, no matter how large their haciendas, were to be subordinate to this new law. It also suggested that the federal government would control any revival of Indigenous landholding practices. The Constitution did not elaborate on what this revival system might entail but this statement made people who owned haciendas very nervous.

In 1934, a new president, Lázaro Cárdenas, was elected. He was passionate about the need for land-use or agrarian reform and so his government enacted an agrarian code. This code detailed how agrarian reform would take place. It created the Secretaría de la Reforma Agraria [Secretariat of Agrarian Reform] (SRA), an entity that would operate on a federal level with state representatives in every part of the Mexican Republic. The SRA would decide which land should be redistributed through ejidos, and which groups of people would be allowed to develop this new kind of collectively owned land. The Cuerpo Consultivo Agrario [Agrarian Consultation Body] (CCA) a five-member decision making body would officially make all these decisions. The SRA and CCA were in charge of theoretically good ideas: they would make people who had more than 150 hectares (370 acres) of land give it to groups of people who needed land of their own to farm. As time went on, the government recognized that it should redistribute different amounts of land depending on whether or not it required irrigation or if it was to be used for crop farming or cattle ranching. These ideas were never well implemented. Ejidos in areas active in the Revolution received better land. Moreover, the bureaucrats and leaders who made petitions on behalf of groups of campesinos so that they could become an ejido were notoriously corrupt.

In spite of these problems, between 1915 and 1993, land was given to more than twenty-eight thousand ejidos, for more than three million households.

**How do Mennonites Interact with this Process?**

Mennonites arrived in Mexico from Canada when many of the details of land reform were still unclear. Indeed, Mennonite church leaders began negotiations with the Mexican government only a few years after the new Constitution was enacted, and Mennonites immigrated to Mexico just over a decade before the agrarian code was implemented. Historian Daniel Nugent observes that Mexican hacienda owners, who had a better understanding of the Mexican political system and saw the writing on the wall, took advantage of the Mennonites, who were so desperate to leave Canada that they bought land from hacienda owners with out clear title, at ten times the going rate.

**Ejido-Related Conflicts**

The Mennonites, in fact, purchased land that remained of significant interest to those labourers who had been working on the haciendas. This led to conflicts in the early years of Mennonite life in Mexico. In fact, historian Andrea Dyck notes that the Mennonites were disappointed when they learned that their land was not free of claims from agraristas, groups of Revolutionary-minded peasants who would petition the government for ejidos. Dyck translates one of Walter Schmiedehaus’ accounts of Mennonites in the Cuauhtémoc area and explains that in 1920, there were eight different agrarista settlements surrounding the Mennonite colonies: “to the south was Chocachic, to the west Napavechic, to the east El Muerto and El Gato, and to the north El Moyote and La Quemada. In the middle of the Mennonite lands were Oje [sic] Caliente and Rubio.” Sawatzky adds that the Mennonites considered the people in Ojo Caliente to be squatters and expected the authorities to remove them. Eventually, the government resolved the problem by creating several ejidos and colonias [colonies, neighbourhoods or ejidos]. Mennonites surely felt surrounded by land problems.
and in fact, they experienced significant violence and theft in the 1930s and 1940s. According to some versions of the oral tradition, in the 1950s, the army was even called in to resolve conflict relating to agrarian reform, especially in the Santa Rita (Namiquipa) area of the state of Chihuahua.

**Conflicts between the 1960s and 1980s**

Conflicts resurfaced several decades later, especially during the tenure of president Luis Echeverría (1970–76). This was because peasants made more land claims, as they believed the promises he had made during his electoral campaign. According to historian Gabriela Soto Laveaga, his administration was “determined to show that the promises of the Mexican Revolution—land, education, labour rights—were still very much alive, and that the state could still provide and protect the well-being of peasants, workers, [and] the indigenous.”15 His administration was semi-successful in implementing its program of land reform, and during this time period, many new ejidos were created.

The ejidos that most strongly affected the Mennonites were the Niño Artillero ejido and others near the La Batea colony in Zacatecas, Mexico. It had so many conflicts in the 1970s and 1980s, that it was informally called *La Batalla* [the battle]; this is a play on words based on the similar Spanish pronunciation of *Batea* and *Batalla*.16 There were also continued conflicts in Santa Rita and elsewhere in Chihuahua in this same time period, after two groups of peasants, from the ejidos Namiquipa and La Paz, asked the government to create new ejidos and then expand them. Mennonite farmers in this area simultaneously applied for *Certificados de Inafectabilidad* [Certificates of Ineligibility for Agrarian Reform] for their properties. These certificates, if granted, would indicate that the SRA had agreed that the land could not become an ejido.

Who were the Mennonites in this area? To the best of my
knowledge, they were descendants of the Sommerfelder from Manitoba. The Sommerfelder bought most of the land that is today the Santa Clara colony from David S. Russek’s hacienda in 1922.17 The initial years of settlement in this area were very difficult, because there was no water for wells and the soil was very stony.18 The colony became connected to other areas of Mennonite settlement after 1946, when people in the Manitoba colony began to buy land north of their colony, to the south of Santa Clara, and to establish what would become the Ojo de la Yegua and Santa Rita colonies.19 By the 1960s and 1970s, Mennonites had developed technology to drill for deeper wells and so they began to prosper. This did not go unnoticed by their neighbours.

Indeed, in 1962, a group of peasants from the ejido Namiquipa, in the Namiquipa municipality in Chihuahua, asked the government to create a new ejido, called Nuevo Namiquipa. Part of the land they sought to farm in Nuevo Namiquipa included land in Mennonite colonies.20 About two and a half years after the peasants asked the government for an ejido, the SRA made a decision. In March 1965 it decreed that 541 people would receive land from the haciendas belonging to Esteban L. Almeida and Guadalupe Chabre de Almeida to form the ejido Nuevo Namiquipa.21 In the ensuing years, the ejido’s population and land needs grew as it transitioned from crop farming to cattle ranching. As a result, in 1967, the ejido Nuevo Namiquipa applied for an expansion. This petition was denied in 1968.22

The ejido then applied for a second expansion in 1968. The SRA approved of this expansion in 1983. This time, it included land “donated” by several Mennonite farmers: Johan Redekop, Ernst Fehr Boehlig, Johan Wiebe Peters, David Dyck Peters, David Martens, Jakob Telchroeb Savasky [Teichroeb Sawatzky], Jakob Friesen Friesen, and Benjamin Froese Dyck. Drought, immigration to Canada, and other benefits may have encouraged this decision.

A nearby group of peasants was likely inspired by the successes of the ejidos Namiquipa and Nuevo Namiquipa. In 1968, the ejido La Paz petitioned for a new ejido, La Nueva Paz. The government accepted their petition in 1970 and created an ejido by redistributing land from several Mennonite farmers, namely, Sawatzky y Heinrich Voth [Heinrich Voth Sawatzky], Tobias Rueck [Dueck], Ernesto Lozano [Loewen], Jacob Webe [Wiebe], Jacob Voth, Heinrich Friessen, Heinrich Hildebrand, Bernard Stez [Stoesz], Katarina Voth de Friessen and Heinrich Klassen.23 These Mennonite farmers would have less land, and approximately fifty-seven landless peasants would be able to farm.

Certificados de Inafectabilidad

Other Mennonite farmers in the area likely became fearful that they would have to donate their land or have it redistributed. From their perspective, the ejidos Nuevo Namiquipa and La Nueva Paz may have appeared to overtake the Mennonite villages in Santa Clara and Santa Rita. The villages might also have been afraid of losing access to their water source, the Santa Clara River. So, Mennonite farmers sought to ensure that their remaining land would not be eligible for redistribution by having the government issue them certificates to prove that they do not own too much land.

Several farmers successfully petitioned the SRA. I will examine one of them. In 1968, the SRA granted Bernard Sawatzky Peters, a farmer in Lot 5, Santa Rita, a certificate rendering his land ineligible for redistribution.24 The certificate explains that he had purchased this land in 1961, and that it bordered on land belonging to several other Mennonite farmers’ properties and the ejido La Nueva Paz. Since the CCA had already deemed this a legitimate private property, the SRA then granted Sawatzky Peters this certificate to ensure that this particular land would be unavailable for agrarian reform.25 Other farmers, like Heinrich Klassen in Lot 12, La Campana, and Jacobo Wiebe Froesse, in Lot 7, La Campana, sought these certificates after having land redistributed to avoid further property loss.26 Other farmers avoided this problem of owning too much land by deeding excess to their wives or daughters, such as a Mr. Peters. His daughters, Justina Peters Boldt de Friessen and Sara Peters Boldt de Friessen are listed as owners of lot 106 A and B in La Campana.27 The women then sought out their own Certificates de Inafectabilidad.

The Mennonites living in or near Ojo de la Yegua, Santa Clara and Santa Rita between the 1960s and 1980s were worried about losing their land. Even though we only see traces of this conflict in these documents, we know from conflict in other areas that documents do not reflect the lived experience of land reform. Indeed, some Mennonites “donated” land that they were going to have to give to ejidos, or deeded it to other family members to avoid forced redistribution. Today, the ejidos Nuevo Namiquipa and Nueva Paz have experienced significant population loss and precarious economic situations,

The Mennonites living in or near Ojo de la Yegua, Santa Clara and Santa Rita between the 1960s and 1980s were worried about losing their land. Even though we only see traces of this conflict in these documents, we know from conflict in other areas that documents do not reflect the lived experience of land reform. Indeed, some Mennonites “donated” land that they were going to have to give to ejidos, or deeded it to other family members to avoid forced redistribution. Today, the ejidos Nuevo Namiquipa and Nueva Paz have experienced significant population loss and precarious economic situations,
like many people in Mexico, and Mennonites may look at the past with regret. They would do well to find a way forward together with ejidos as all people in Mexico have many reasons to be wary about what the future holds.

Endnotes
1 David Friesen, Review of La Honda: 50 Years by Peter Bergen, Preservings No. 36 (2016): 71-72.
5 Manuel Fabila, Cinco siglos de la legislación agraria en México (1493-1940) [Five Centuries of Agrarian Legislation in Mexico] (Mexico City: Procuraduría Agraria, 2005), 482.
6 Fabila, Cinco Siglos, 482.
12 See, e.g., Cincosiglos, 482.
13 Sawatzky, They Sought a Country, 67.
14 Sawatzky, They Sought a Country, 71.
16Sources also list conflict in the farm formerly known as La Campana. Cross-examining these reports with lists of all population centres in the municipalities of Riva Palacio and Namiquipa, which are either numbered villages or ejidos, leads me to believe this land was in villages that were part of the Santa Rita or Santa Clara colony or it may have been additional land owned by Mennonite farmers living in those areas.
17 Sawatzky, They Sought a Country, 51.
18 Sawatzky, They Sought a Country, 71.
20 “Solicitudes de vecinos radicados en el poblado de Namiquipa, Municipio del mismo nombre, Estado de Chihuahua, para la creación de un centro de población agrícola que se denominará Nuevo Namiquipa” [“Application from Neighbours in the Area of Namiquipa, Municipality of the Same Name, State of Chihuahua, for the Creation of an Agricultural Population Centre to be Called Nuevo Namiquipa”]. Diario Oficial de la Federación 1 Aug. 1962: 16. I have corrected these surnames to the way they are typically spelled in Mexico. The first surname is paternal, the second maternal and the third (optional) surname is a woman’s married surname.
21 “Resolución sobre la creación de un nuevo centro de población para fines ganaderos, que se denominará Nuevo Namiquipa, en Chihuahua, y Namiquipa, Chihuahua” [“Resolution Regarding the Creation of a New Population Centre for Cattle, which will be Called Nuevo Namiquipa, in Chihuahua, and Namiquipa, Chihuahua”]. Diario Oficial de la Federación 27 Mar 1965: 16.
23 “Resolución sobre la creación de un nuevo centro de población agrícola que se denominará La Nueva Paz, en Riva Palacio, Chih.” [“Resolution Regarding the Creation of a New Agricultural Population that will be Called La Nueva Paz, in Riva Palacio, Chih.”]. Diario Oficial de la Federación 12 Sept 1970: 15.
24 Other farmers are cited elsewhere in this essay), incl. Johann Heide Beeckert, Franz Enns Krahm, Jacob Klassen Fahr [Fehr], Heinrich Ennes [Enns] Reimer, Jacob W. Penner Wolf and Abraham Dick Friesen (“Acuerdo sobre inafectabilidad agrícola, relativo al predio rústico denominado Lote 11 en La Campana, ubicado en el municipio de Riva Palacio, Chih.”) [“Agreement about Ineligibility for Agrarian Reform, Regarding the Rural Plot called Lot 11 in La Campana, in the Municipality of Riva Palacio, Chih.”]. Diario Oficial de la Federación 21 Dec 1983: 25-26; “Acuerdo sobre inafectabilidad agrícola, relativo a los predios rústicos denominados Lotes 12 y 13 en Namiquipa, ubicado en el municipio de Riva Palacio, Chih.”] [“Agreement about Ineligibility for Agrarian Reform, Regarding the Rural Plot called Lots 12 and 13 in Santa Rita, in the Municipality of Riva Palacio, Chih.”]. Diario Oficial de la Federación 30 Dec 1983: 55-56; “Acuerdo sobre inafectabilidad agrícola, relativo al predio rústico denominado Lote 17 de Santa Rita, ubicado en el municipio de Riva Palacio, Chih.” [“Agreement about Ineligibility for Agrarian Reform, Regarding the Rural Plot called Lot 17 in Santa Rita, in the Municipality of Riva Palacio, Chih.”]. Diario Oficial de la Federación 2 Jan 1984: 17-18; “Acuerdo sobre inafectabilidad agrícola, relativo al predio rústico denominado Lote 25 de Santa Rita, ubicado en el municipio de Riva Palacio, Chih.” [“Agreement about Ineligibility for Agrarian Reform, Regarding the Rural Plot called Lot 25 in Santa Rita, in the Municipality of Riva Palacio, Chih.”]. Diario Oficial de la Federación 2 Jan 1984: 18; “Acuerdo sobre inafectabilidad agrícola, relativo al predio rústico denominado Lote 5 de Santa Rita, ubicado en el municipio de Riva Palacio, Chih.” [“Agreement about Ineligibility for Agrarian Reform, Regarding the Rural Plot called Lot 5 in Santa Rita, in the Municipality of Riva Palacio, Chih.”]. Diario Oficial de la Federación 2 Jan 1984: 19-20; “Acuerdo sobre inafectabilidad agrícola, relativo al predio rústico denominado Lote 12 del predio La Campana, ubicado en el municipio de Riva Palacio, Chih.” [“Agreement about Ineligibility for Agrarian Reform, Regarding the Rural Plot called Lot 12 in Santa Rita, in the Municipality of Riva Palacio, Chih.”]. Diario Oficial de la Federación 2 Jan 1984: 15-16; “Acuerdo sobre inafectabilidad agrícola, relativo al predio rústico denominado Lote 7 del predio La Campana, ubicado en el municipio de Riva Palacio, Chih.” [“Agreement about Ineligibility for Agrarian Reform, Regarding the Rural Plot called Lot 7 in Santa Rita, in the Municipality of Riva Palacio, Chih.”]. Diario Oficial de la Federación 2 Jan 1984: 14-15.
25 It is possible that these are not the same farmers, since more than one Mennonite farmer have had the same first and last name; it is less common to share first names and paternal and maternal surnames.
26 “Acuerdo sobre inafectabilidad agrícola, relativo al predio rústico denominado Lote 106 Fracción A del predio La Campana, ubicado en el municipio de Riva Palacio, Chih.” [“Agreement about Ineligibility for Agrarian Reform, Regarding the Rural Plot called Lot 106, Fraction A in La Campana, in the Municipality of Riva Palacio, Chih.”]. Diario Oficial de la Federación 1984: 69. Sawatzky differs between the terms “colonias” and “ejidos”; however, the meaning of these terms did technically differ between 1934 and 1992 (69n28). In practice, many ejido titles include the word “colonia” and this distinction is unclear.
27 “Acuerdo sobre inafectabilidad agrícola, relativo al predio rústico denominado Lote 5 de Santa Rita, ubicado en el municipio de Riva Palacio, Chih.” [“Agreement about Ineligibility for Agrarian Reform, Regarding the Rural Plot called Lot 5 in Santa Rita, in the Municipality of Riva Palacio, Chih.”]. Diario Oficial de la Federación 2 Jan 1984: 24-25; “Acuerdo sobre inafectabilidad agrícola, relativo al predio rústico denominado Lote 12 del predio La Campana, ubicado en el municipio de Riva Palacio, Chih.” [“Agreement about Ineligibility for Agrarian Reform, Regarding the Rural Plot called Lot 12 in Santa Rita, in the Municipality of Riva Palacio, Chih.”]. Diario Oficial de la Federación 2 Jan 1984: 21-22; “Agreement about Ineligibility for Agrarian Reform, Regarding the Rural Plot called Lot 11 in La Campana, in the Municipality of Riva Palacio, Chih.”]. Diario Oficial de la Federación 2 Jan 1984: 19.)
When Parents Leave Children Behind: The Mennonite Waisenamt

By Ernie Braun, Niverville, MB

Introduction
To introduce the concept of the Waisenamt – consider these two photos, taken twenty-eight years apart. The first one is that of my grandmother in the coffin, taken in March 1927 in the tent village in Puerto Casado, Paraguay. My father (circled) was eleven years old. The second is that of my Dad in the coffin, taken in November 1955 in Gnadenfeld, East Reserve. I had just turned eight years old two weeks earlier. Both of us became wards of the Waisenamt as a result of these tragedies.

For many readers that may not be very meaningful. You may have thought that “Waisenamt” was the name of a forgotten village in Germany. It is, in fact, the name of an institution that Mennonites created or reproduced in Russia in order to implement inheritance practices they had followed in Poland/Prussia. In southeastern Manitoba it was still in effect in 1955, when I came under its jurisdiction, and indeed it persisted until after the turn of the twentieth century.

Today inheritance practices are complicated by legislation and tax law to the point where usually only a lawyer or accountant is competent to write a will. Things were not always that way, but the problem of inheritances has always existed ever since the invention of private ownership. This article will deal only with the Waisenamt itself and not the larger topic of inheritance practices. The Waisenamt is an important part of our Mennonite story because it directly affects the family and because it involves not only secular but also spiritual matters.

The letterhead in the photo on the following page reads “Mariupoler Mennoniten Waisenamt,” the name of the Waisenamt in the Bergthal Colony in Russia. Here in Manitoba it became the Mennoniten Waisenamt der Gemeinde Chortitz (literally Mennonite Orphan Office of the Chortitz Church). Interestingly enough, the concept of an ‘orphan’s office’ is not uniquely Mennonite in origin, but arises out of the conditions in northern Europe where Mennonites lived for hundreds of years before moving to New Russia (now Ukraine), where life was characterized as follows:

- Everybody lived in a small one-street village;
- Everybody made their living from the land and livestock, at a subsistence level;
Everybody saw children as both the normal consequence of marriage, but also an economic asset to the family unit; In this era young married women often died in childbirth, and there was no medical care beyond the knowledge that was handed down from one’s grandmother; And, of course everybody lived far from any city with no transportation beyond the horse.

If one adds up the factors above one can see the resemblance to the life that Mennonites experienced here in Manitoba until seventy-five to one hundred years ago.

Waisenamt Background

Several hundred years ago Mennonites lived in the northern part of Poland/Prussia, an area where a large percentage of the population lived as farmers, some owning their own land, but most living on long-term lease land. Mennonites used the same inheritance practices as their neighbours. There was nothing particularly spiritual about bilaterality and partibility, terms still used today about inheritance practices. ‘Bilaterality’ simply means that husband and wife are treated as equals – both can inherit without discrimination on the basis of gender – and ‘partibility’ means that an estate can be broken up into smaller pieces so that all children can inherit, as opposed to ‘primo- geniture,’ where only the oldest child can inherit the estate.

When the Mennonites migrated to New Russia in the late 1700s, they took these customs with them but it took some negotiation with the Russian authorities to get them accepted there. In the end they were allowed to carry on with their own practices, a privilege not necessarily extended to other German immigrants. Consequently on the basis of that privilege, Mennonite leaders generated their own version of inheritance principles in 1792, and these have been preserved into our own era.

The difference in New Russia was that there for the first time, the fundamental principle of these inheritance practices was established as a spiritual imperative: take care of the vulnerable. Incorporated into that first document was the goal of the Waisenamt: “To do justice to the orphans and widows; to give testimony before God, society and their children, that is their future heirs, that they had treated the children’s interests in such a manner, that they could not rightfully complain.” In fact, in the foreword to the 1880 adaptation of the Waisenamt rule book, the justification for the Waisenamt is given as Isaiah 1:17: “Learn to do right; seek justice, relieve the oppressed; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow.”

There was one other factor that played into the inheritance policy: that was the doctrine of humility that was to characterize Mennonite life and thought. It was referred to as Demut – humbleness, already a mandate of Martin Luther and adopted rather seriously by Mennonites to this day. This factor was to
play a role in the effectiveness of the Waisenamt, as will be seen later.

The purpose of the Waisenamt, to take care of the vulnerable, was based on the premise that children had an inherent right to receive their due inheritance and that widows could not be denied their rights to the fruit of their labour. Then secondly, in a very pragmatic way, Mennonite leaders wanted to create a system that would protect those rights and at the same time ensure an orderly transfer of land between generations without disrupting the village. Thirdly, this system also served to minimize conflict and stress on the family in times of premature death of caregivers, or in hardship cases – all without recourse to legal advice which was almost non-existent, and too expensive for the widow in any event.

The Waisenamt

The Waisenamt was a type of Surrogate Court, or Probate Court, a branch of present-day law that governs estates, ensuring that debts are paid and that heirs receive their due. It was designed to serve two fundamental functions:

1. Last Will and Testament
2. Pre-nuptial agreement (in case of remarriage)

It ended up serving an additional function as the first credit union, and then as a further consequence a sort of community chest for community projects.

Last Will and Testament

The default inheritance policy was that upon the death of a spouse, the value of the estate was divided equally between the surviving spouse and the children. Notably there were no gender distinctions, something that was probably well ahead of its time since in Canada women only became persons in 1929, while the policy for Mennonites dates back to 1792. The process of settling an estate followed this pattern. Upon the death of a spouse:

1. The Village mayor would conduct an inventory of Assets and Liabilities (Art. 24-6, 32);
2. Two financial advisors would be appointed for the surviving spouse (Art. 34);
3. The Waisenamt and interested parties would conduct an appraisal of land, buildings, and chattels (Art. 38), noting specific exceptions that could not be included or divided: bedding etc. (Art. 38);
4. The Waisenamt would provide public notice and make payment of debts owing (Art. 36);
5. And finally, all parties together would fill out an estate division, or distribution contract. (Art. 38-9)

The Distribution Contract

The distribution contract (Teilungs Kontrakt) is the key document – it spells out the obligations to which the surviving spouse commits to ensure that the children receive their due inheritance.

It specifies that half the estate to be given to the children’s Waisenamt account in one of the following ways:

a) Cash by a given date in near future – only in rare instances;

b) Cash by a date at which child reaches specified age, usually sixteen or eighteen, usually contingent upon sale of the farm;
c) Payment of interest at the going Waisenamt rate after age sixteen or eighteen in the case where the farm is not sold;
d) Other provisions and exceptions, like special inheritance stipulations: a son would get a horse, a daughter would get a cow, each child would get a Bible and Gesangbuch (song book) or Catechism;
e) Or a sale at auction of the land and estate to one child and then proceeds are divided between spouse and children.

The overriding principle here was that the farm itself, the Wirtschaft, was not divided under any circumstances, and the surviving spouse retained the right to live there and continue farming as long as he or she wanted or until he or she remarried.

Remarriage

Since women, and men too for that matter, often died young, many widows and widowers remarried. A second marriage by the surviving spouse was anticipated in the Waisenamt.
policy, which then served to protect the rights of the children from the first marriage. A case study provides a good example to help clarify how the Waisenamt functioned in these situations: A young wife and mother dies in childbirth, widowing her husband and leaving three young children. The husband needs a caregiver for the children and so, after a minimum of three months, he remarries. So far so good. However, the only woman within walking distance is a widow with two children of her own who are somewhat older than his; but nonetheless, we now have a blended family. Sounds like the only reasonable solution. Fifteen years later, however, the husband dies, leaving a blended family and widow. We now have five children, three who would ordinarily inherit from the father and two from the mother, and one remaining spouse. In this situation, we have three competing interests for the estate of this family. The potential for family strife is very high.

The solution in complex situations like this example was again somewhat ahead of its time. In a time and place where access to legal advice and legal recourse in the case of remarriage and inheritance disputes was absent, the Waisenamt took on another role for which there is no word in Low German: a prenuptial agreement. Although Article 41 of the Waisen-Verordnung was not called by that name, in effect it was a default pre-nuptial agreement that automatically came into play when a remarriage was pending. In fact, the Bishop would not allow a wedding to proceed unless he received a signed document from the Waisenamt stating that the provisions of the estate division contract had been met.

Those provisions could be onerous in that half of the total estate would have to be signed over to the Waisenamt, in one form or another, before the remarriage could be approved by the Bishop.

The surviving spouse had several alternatives:

1. Cash payout – usually not an option;
2. Sale of chattels and cattle etc. to provide cash;
3. Loan at the Waisenamt at interest to cover remainder of the debt to the children; sometimes mortgaging the homestead;
4. Other – special agreement between the parties, sometimes without the endorsement of the Waisenamt.

It is clear that while the intent was to protect the vulnerable (children or widow), in reality this procedure could cause some hardship in cases where there were several remarriages, and estates were divided over and over again. In the end, a large part of the church membership either owed money to the Waisenamt or were owed money by the Waisenamt.

**Lending Institution**

Since the Waisenamt carried out the inheritance agreements of the entire membership, it accumulated a significant amount of capital for its various services, including inheritance monies, interest payments, auction commissions, Waisenamt fees, deposits and repayments etc. Out of that accumulation of capital arose another role that the Waisenamt played in the Mennonite world. At a time and place where access to banks was difficult and time-consuming, the Waisenamt stepped into the vacuum and became a forerunner of type of credit union.

This new role developed quite naturally when, in order to safeguard the funds on deposit for children and widows or widowers, the Waisenamt needed to do what all financial institutions do, invest the money so that it can return the money plus interest to the rightful owners. This meant several things, but primarily it meant that individuals in the community could borrow from the Waisenamt at six percent with the Waisenamt crediting five percent to the account. The difference covered the expenses of the Waisenamt.

There were very specific regulations regarding security, usually two co-signers for each loan, stipulating annual repayments plus interest. In this way, the money on deposit at the Waisenamt, that is the money reserved for future heirs, began a life of its own as capital accumulated.

Two new functions emerged, a savings and loan function, and a community chest that supported Mennonite schools, and later played an indispensable role in the emigration to Manitoba in the 1870s. The savings and loan function changed the economic landscape, for it then enabled farm families to purchase and finance land, implements, livestock, medical emergencies, and vehicles including wagons and cars. Maybe that last item is instructive: once Mennonites had cars, they became increasingly mobile, and many of the reasons for the Waisenamt simply disappeared.

A cheque for thirty dollars made payable to the author’s grandfather, Jacob F. Braun of Grunthal, Manitoba, on December 12, 1917 from the Waisenvorsteher, C. T. Friesen.
The End of the Chortitzer Waisenamt

As you can see, the Waisenamt was a foundational and valuable institution for Mennonites for at least 150 years, but we do not have it today. This is not an academic paper and I am not a sociologist. Therefore I can speak only in the most general terms about what caused the end of the Waisenamt in Manitoba. By the 1960s there was a marked decline in activity and by the 1990s there was virtually no activity, although a friend mentioned to me that as recently as 1991 money from the Waisenamt had enabled him to raise a down payment on a home.

In 2002, after some years of debate, the Chortitzer Mennonite Church (now called the Christian Mennonite Conference or CMC) membership made the decision to dissolve the Waisenamt. There was still a considerable sum of money in the account and due diligence was exercised in determining who still had capital in the fund. In the end some money was left over, and it was given over to the CMC conference in about 2007.

Why did such a valuable institution dissolve? I do not have a definitive answer, but some thoughts come to mind:

- Urban drift: we are no longer a rural people. We live in towns and cities and have access to all the amenities there;
- Cash economy: we are no longer an agrarian people. We have careers and jobs with steady incomes, and the death of a spouse does not usually involve a farm;
- Assimilation: Like the world around us, we use legal wills and bank mortgages;
- Size of operations: those of us who are farmers are no longer small farmers and therefore the amount of money needed today by one farmer in his line of credit is probably more than the Waisenamt ever had in any ten year time period;
- Rise of independence of the community: we no longer look to our church or neighbours for assistance, we are independent, and make our own way.
- Mobility: we are empowered by our cars to surmount distance and limitations of all kinds;

There are other reasons not mentioned above, in some cases: for example the West Reserve Waisenamt got caught up in investment in the 1920s and went bankrupt after the 1929 crash. The Waisenamt in Paraguay sustained a law suit from one of its own disgruntled members, and was forced to suspend much of its financial operations, although it continues to manage inheritances.

Conclusion

In retrospect then, what role did the Waisenamt play in our Mennonite story? What are the implications of such specific inheritance practices over time?

Within the Mennonite community, and the academic world, there is no consensus on this. In fact in some Mennonite circles there are stories of genuine hardship ascribed to the insensitive practices of some Waisenamt administrators. Some historians...
contend that the Mennonite leaders had nefarious motives in this, intentionally weakening the domestic unit (family) in order to control the membership and thereby maintain the cohesiveness of the community. There is also an argument that ensuring that every child received an inheritance reduced the enticement offered by the "world" and therefore served the purpose of the spiritual leadership. Others argue that this kind of inheritance system flattens the economic profile within the group, so that the aggressive members cannot get ahead, and everybody is forced to be humble whether they want to or not. Or some have argued that the Waisenamt shows the hypocrisy of the Mennonites – professing to be a spiritual group but really running their communities along hard economic principles, suggesting that spirituality and common sense cannot exist side by side.

In the absence of professional consensus, maybe I could just summarize quickly some of the major interpretations in their simplest form, and let the reader take it from there.

**Option 1:** Waisenamt = A Biblical provision for orphans and widows, as per Waisenamt policy manual, premised on the Old Testament injunction in Isaiah 1:17; namely a spiritually driven mechanism to compel people to love their spouses and children in this most worldly matter – the estate.

**Option 2:** Waisenamt = A devious even Machiavellian scheme to control women by empowering them with property rights, weakening families by giving everybody a share in the estate, and hamstringing individuals by ensuring that nobody stands out from others, that thereby ensures everybody remains equally humble and all have to conform to the community.

**Option 3:** Waisenamt = A practical this-worldly inheritance policy designed to create sustainable land management and to minimize family strife while enhancing community as the way to retain spiritual and temporal values.

**Option 4:** Waisenamt = None of the above, all of the above, variations of the above, or other:

Should there be those who wish to answer that question definitively, the Chortitzer Waisenamt records are now available in both hard copy (23 boxes of papers) and digital form (35,000 JPG images) at Mennonite Heritage Archives.

**Endnotes**

1 Part of the history lectures sponsored by the EastMenn Historical Committee of the Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society and the Mennonite Heritage Village, May 6, 2017 Steinbach, Manitoba.


3 Mennonites did not really own their own land in the way we understand it today. The land belonged to the village, and the farmer was entitled to a plot in the village and a part of the larger land base granted to that village. So, what was really being passed down when a farmer died was the right to that part of the village grant, and not a title deed as such. This has to be kept in mind when one begins to examine the implications of the inheritance system used in Russia.

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**Blended families were certainly a feature of the past when death in childbirth or premature death due to illness claimed many parents and partners. Second and third marriages were often the result and as Ernie Braun notes, complicated and emphasized the role of the Waisenamt. Ed.**

**An Uncharacteristically Large Mennonite Family**

By Peter Goertzen†

After several years of genealogical research among my Mennonite ancestors I have become quite accustomed to large families, very early re-marriages of widows and widowers, and the repetition of given names. When a friend recently asked me to check on a family for him, however, I came across a most exceptional example of these characteristics.

It started with a Gerhard Niebuhr, born in 1818, who married one Margaretha Braun in 1838. The couple had eight children after which Jacob passed away and his widow married one Daniel Teichroeb. Four children later, Margaretha died and her widower married a younger woman, Elisabeth Nickel, who bore him an additional ten children. Shortly after, Daniel passed away and Elisabeth decided to marry a widower, Jacob Fehr.

In order to completely understand Jacob Fehr’s marital status I had to go back to one Anna Thiessen, born 1831, who married a Peter Peters. This couple had nine children when Peter passed on and Anna married the said Jacob Fehr. Jacob brought along nine children from his first marriage. Now Anna and Jacob had two children of their own and when Anna died, Jacob married Agranetha Giesbrecht and she bore him four children. It was after Agranetha died that Jacob married the widow Elisabeth, mentioned above, in early spring of 1895.

This last union made the couple parents, in a sense, to all of the following: eight Niebuhr-Braun children; four Teichroeb-Braun children; ten Teichroeb-Nickel children; nine Peters-Thiessen children; nine Fehr-(??) children; two Fehr-Thiessen children; and four Fehr-Giesbrecht children.

A grand total of forty-six offspring!

I also noted that the oldest ‘parent’ was born in 1817 while the youngest didn’t arrive until 1851. Of the eight marriages that took place among the various fathers and mothers, the first occurred in 1838 and the last in 1895 – almost sixty years later. The difference in age between the oldest and the youngest child was fifty-five years (Peter Niebuhr, born 1839, and Maria Teichroeb, born 1894). Three ‘sisters and brothers’ were born in 1859 and there was only one set of twins, born in 1863.

The names of the children proved no less interesting. There was one Gerhard, David, Julius, Cornelius, Herman, and Daniel. There were two each of: Katharina, Agatha, Elisabeth, Sara, Helena, Isaak, and Aron. The family had three Johanns, Marias, and Agranethas, as well as four Peters, Jacob and Annas. The most popular name, however, was Margaretha, of which there were five!

As I filed the last of the information for my friend I found myself wondering how this family would have reacted to such modern terms as ‘planned parenthood,’ ‘birth control,’ ‘generation gap,’ or ‘single parent family’?

**Endnotes**

1 Submitted by James Driedger, nephew of the author. Peter Goertzen served on numerous boards in Alberta and Western Canada dealing with museum work and historical societies. He served as curator for two museums in his career; Mennonite Village Museum in Steinbach, Manitoba and the Grande Prairie Museum in Grande Prairie, Alberta. Peter passed away at age of 66 in La Cote, Alberta in September of 2007. This short story was found in his many collections of historical and genealogical work.
Early Years

“We saw that in Paraguay the fruit grows wild in the bush,” the Canadian Mennonite delegates reported in 1921, after they had made an expedition to the Chaco region in Paraguay. Later on, Jacob B. Reimer wrote about this in his unpublished diaries: “We boys were glad that we would pick oranges, grapefruit and bananas from the wild trees in the bush after arriving in Paraguay. There were no oranges in the bush in Canada.” Such stories raised great expectations in the ten-year-old boy Jacob, who heard from his parents that they and other families would move to Paraguay.

Jacob B. Reimer was born on September 13, 1916, in Manitoba, Canada, as the third child of his parents Jakob F. and Katharina (Braun) Reimer. He wrote about his school days in Canada: “I was in grade 5 in a Canadian public school, where the classes were taught in English. Since our teacher was Wilhelm S. Buhr, a Mennonite, the German language and religion were also taught.” He liked to go to school, and in his later years he continued to correspond with Mr. Buhr via mail. When Jacob was ten years old, the Reimer family with nine children immigrated to Paraguay and difficult years of pioneering followed.

As an adult he wrote about his memory of arriving in Puerto Casado, Paraguay and included this description:

In 1926 we celebrated Christmas on the Asuncion steamship on the way to Puerto Casado. There were no festivities, no snow, and we children were fondly remembering Christmas past in Canada. It had been 37 days since we left Manitoba when we landed in the port of Puerto Casado on 31st of December. My brothers and I were eagerly looking for the first oranges we would pick off the trees in the bush. Our father had already warned us, that we might have to plant those fruit trees first. How right he was, I discovered at a later time when we planted our own orchard and picked dates, oranges, tangerines, lemons, bananas, grapefruit and even figs from our trees.¹

After spending one year in the settler’s tent village at Puerto Casado, the Reimer family settled in the new village of Weidenfeld, in the Chaco region of Paraguay. Jacob and his older brothers assisted their parents as they built their first house and began clearing the land for farming. Since Jacob was not yet fourteen years old, he had to attend the village school for a few more years. The curriculum consisted of the first reader, catechism, Bible and some basic arithmetic and penmanship. Jacob told his children many years later that he read through the whole Bible several times out of boredom in those two years. This contributed to his extraordinary Bible knowledge, which was of great value to him in his life and work later.

Jacob was baptized upon confession of his faith in 1941 and he became a member of the Mennonite church in Menno Colony. In September of that year he married Aganetha Wiebe and they settled together on a farm in the most north-eastern village of Edental. Heavy labour, poverty, dry years, illness, and grasshoppers made life difficult for them. Four children were born to them (Henry, Tina, Maria, Helena) and later a son (Bernhard) was added through adoption.

Family History

Jacob B. Reimer (1916-1985)

By Maria (Mary) Reimer de Friesen, Winnipeg, Manitoba

Community Leader

In 1945 Jacob was elected into the colony administrative committee for the first time and in 1950 he was elected to be the Vorsteher. According to colony statistics, in 1950 the population of the Menno Colony was 3,370 in 52 villages with 560 families. In the next decade the colony administration was moving towards a more centrally organized structure. Since the office for the administration was in Loma Plata, Jacob had to travel by horse and buggy, leaving their farm in Edental at 4:00 a.m. on Monday morning to begin the work week at 7:00 a.m. He usually managed to come home once during the week (Wednesdays) and then again on Saturday afternoon for Sunday. These were difficult years for his wife Aganetha and the four young children who were left on their own on the farm. This election was only for a one-year-term, but after he was re-elected for the third time, they dared to sell the farm and move the whole family to Loma Plata. For seventeen years he was elected every year to the position of Oberschulze and then again for two more years in 1973-74.

Some of the highlights of his time as Oberschulze in the 1960s were two international trips. In 1960 he was asked by Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) to accompany the MCC representative, Frank Wiens, on a trip to Chile. A strong earthquake had hit Chile and caused immense damage. MCC representatives were sent to assess the damage and to recommend what kind of relief effort they might be able to initiate. MCC wanted to involve the Mennonite colonies (Menno, Fernheim, Neuland) in this response, if at all possible. Therefore, they asked Jacob B. Reimer to accompany Wiens on this trip to Chile. It was obvious in the reports afterwards that Jacob was deeply moved by what he had seen and by the conversations they had with local people and church leaders in Chile.

Another highlight was the study trip to Hannover, Germany in 1962 which was offered to Jacob in order to learn more about the cooperative system used in that country and elsewhere in Europe. The course was six weeks long and afterwards he visited numerous business leaders and churches in Germany, the Netherlands, and Switzerland in order to create connections for the colony. He wrote in his letters home during that time, how privileged he was to be able to communicate in three languages (German, English, Spanish), since the participants included those language groups. In a report about this trip he wrote: “I have known for some time now, that we need to do something about improving our school system, but I have never seen so clearly, how urgent this is.”

Together with some other leaders in the colony, Jacob B. Reimer began promoting educational reform and he himself enrolled in different correspondence courses to further his education. The schools were under the leadership of the church but it was left up to each village to hire a teacher and to implement the basic curriculum. The church leadership was only responsible to make sure religion was taught...
and the rest was up to the village teacher. A teacher’s salary and qualifications were left up to the decision of the village farmers. Jacob wrote:

At the beginning of the 1950s the schools in Menno Colony were taken over by the colonial administration, or rather the schools were handed over to the administration. This change was the beginning for the teachers to be employed by the colony; the teaching in the schools became more uniform; the curriculum was expanded to include social and natural sciences and in time the Mennonite schools received recognition from the state.3

His children have memories of their father having meetings in their yard under a tree with four other men when they were planning to build the very first high school.4 It is quite amazing to think that none of these men had a formal education beyond grade six or seven and they were determined to plan and build a high school for their children. As the colony leader, Jacob was able to get financial support from Germany for the construction of the high school in Loma Plata and was able to get library books and textbooks through the German consulate. It was a joyous occasion for him and the whole family when the Vereinsschule (high school) opened its doors to the first students, which included the oldest two of Jacob and Aganetha’s children. In spite of much opposition from the larger group of conservative Mennonites in this colony, this small committee moved forward and eventually reformed the whole education system in Menno Colony. Jacob B. Reimer was convinced that as the mayor of the Menno Colony he needed to be able to speak the Spanish language in order to be able to represent the colony to government officials. Therefore, he continued with correspondence courses which included language studies in Spanish, English, and German, some accounting and business courses, and also some biblical studies. His children remember him always having one or another course on the go.

One of the significant topics of discussion in the Reimer family in the late 1950s was “the one million dollar loan.” The children have vivid memories how their father often spoke with excitement and concern about the one million dollar loan the five Mennonite colonies were taking on in 1958. In one of his reports, Jacob writes:

Through negotiations with MCC the five colonies received a long-term loan from the USA government of one million dollars which helped to kick-start the development of the colonies. Each colony received a part of this amount relative to their population and since Menno was the largest of the five colonies, they received the greater share of this loan. The colonies were able to repay the loan plus interest in a timely manner. The administration used this loan to buy the first bulldozers, road equipment, tractors, equipment for the peanut oil press, and other agricultural equipment the farmers needed.5

This loan was a big risk, but Jacob felt that doing nothing was an even bigger risk.

Contributions

At the funeral of Jacob B. Reimer it was very obvious how many lives he had touched and how many connections he had to individuals and agencies in Paraguay and beyond. Some of the condolences that came in were from Mr. Bontrager, representative of MCC North America, C. Beekhuis, representative of the International Mennonite Organization in Europe (IMO), J. Wall, representative of Mennonite Brethren Missions North America, government officials from Paraguay, and many representatives from organizations in the Mennonite colonies. On more than one occasion Jacob would suggest to his adult children: “Whenever you have a chance to get to know another person, make good use of the opportunity. This will always enrich your lives.” He himself found many such opportunities in his work and in his personal life. He often received outside visitors to the colony as part of his responsibilities as administrator of the colony and frequently he invited guests from Europe or North America to stay with them in their home. In this regard, Aganetha was always a wonderful hostess and pleased to enlarge also her circle of friends. These many connections with people from other colonies, government officials, and representatives of foreign agencies enriched his personal and
professional life and also benefitted the colony in its development. For example, in one of the minutes of August 27, 1965, we read: “Oberschulze Reimer informs the committee, that Menno Colony should be expecting an increase in the financial support from Germany, according to what he had been told by the German ambassador Mr. Klotsche.” In a private letter to his children he wrote in December 1966: “I am in Asunción for meetings with other colony mayors and representatives of MCC and IMO. Both our projects have been accepted by the development agency in Bonn, Germany: one for road construction and the other for the building of a new dairy processing plant.” Jacob provided leadership for the overall development of the colony and was able to use his international connections for additional financial support.

During his seventeen years as Oberschulze of Menno Colony, Jacob contributed to the overall economic development of the colony, provided leadership in reforming of the educational system, supported the development work of the mission agencies, and promoted cooperation and partnership with other Mennonite colonies, Fernheim and Neuland in particular. Some of the visible signs of progress were the expansion of health services and a new hospital, the building of the dairy processing plant, new initiatives in manufacturing and industry and the establishment of a colony co-operative as the economic umbrella organization for Menno Colony. In 1968 the colony elected Jacob N. Giesbrecht as their Oberschulze and Jacob B. Reimer took a year off to visit children in Canada and then spent six months in Germany participating in another course about cooperative administration and development. In the years that followed, he was actively involved in different aspects of colony life and for a number of years he was the Director of Education and Training. He often said that he could not have accomplished what he did, if it was not for the grace of God, the consistent support of Ältester (bishop) Martin C. Friesen, and the support of his wife Aganetha. He wrote: “There were highs and lows in the economic and social life of the colony. Upon reflection, I must conclude that it was the grace of God and the trust of the colony people that made it possible to settle in this wilderness.” And in the 1960s and 1970s the Reimer family harvested many different kinds of tropical fruits from their own orchard – even if not from the wild trees in the thorny bush.

Jacob was once more elected as Oberschulze of the Menno Colony in 1973 and he served two more years when the colony struggled through a difficult financial crisis. After his resignation in 1974, he was somewhat at a loss as to his future contribution and once again they spent about five months in Canada. He enrolled in some college courses in Winnipeg and felt rewarded to receive a B+ in Cultural Anthropology and Mennonite Studies courses. These were also the years when he found great joy in spending time with the grandchildren and getting to know them better.

**Jacob, the Family Man**

It is true, his children remember him as the official administrator who spent most of his time in the office and on travel within the colony or to Asunción but it was always understood that his efforts to reform the school system and to stabilize the colony economy was done in order to give his children and other youth a better future. At no point did the children wonder about the importance they had in their father’s life. There are

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*In 1960, Jacob B. Reimer was appointed by the Government of Manitoba (Canada) as Commissioner of Oaths, which authorized him to sign official documents on behalf of the Government of Manitoba. This was significant for many of the colony people who still had Canadian citizenship, especially those who wanted to register their children as born abroad or those who wanted to move back to Canada.*

*J. J. Thiessen, Aganetha Reimer, Jacob B. Reimer, and son, Henry Reimer, at Canadian Mennonite Bible College graduation.*

*The Reimer family (left to right): Maria, Helena, Bernhard, Henry, and Tina, with their parents, Aganetha and Jacob (front row).*
fond memories of “story time” on Saturday evenings after the chores were done and supper dishes cleaned away. Jacob loved to read and invested in magazines and books and the children benefitted from his gift of storytelling. During their teenage years, the children would still share their Saturday evenings with their parents and talk about school, life in dormitory, and issues that had come up in class discussions, and the parents would listen with interest.

His daughter Maria remembers how their father would sometimes challenge the children to a hundred-metre race. This was so much fun, trying to beat their father running a race – but he won. His love, trust, and integrity is what the children remember most of all. Of course, when the grandchildren joined the family, he was the kindest and proudest Opa anyone could wish for. He delighted in the accomplishments of all the grandchildren at every stage in life.

**Working with Indigenous People**

In June of 1978 Jacob B. Reimer was asked to take on the Executive Director position of the Association of Services with Indigenous People and Mennonites (ASCIM), which he accepted. This organization worked on behalf of the three Mennonite colonies (Menno, Fernheim, and Neuland) with Indigenous people and development organizations. In the next seven years he dedicated all his time and energy to working with Indigenous people in the Chaco region and represented their interests to the government, in the churches, and to different foreign development agencies. He advocated for the rights of Indigenous people and worked for the advancement of their educational and social system with the same resolve and commitment that he demonstrated earlier in colony leadership. In December of 1983 (at age sixty-seven) he wrote in a letter to his children:

> I am back home again after driving 250 km today. We had difficult meetings and some heavy conversations. One of the meetings was with 14 indigenous leaders and the other meeting was with 80 people from the Lenga clan [Indigenous]. Both had their problems and were looking for advice. I left home shortly after 6:00 a.m. and returned home at 8:00 p.m. ‘Siesta’ [nap] time was not part of this day.

He had many of those long days when he travelled on bad dirt roads in his Jeep and listened to different voices within the Indigenous community. Still, he found the work very rewarding.

In July of 1984 he accompanied several of the Indigenous leaders to the Mennonite World Conference in France and visited many churches in Europe after the conference sessions to report about the work of the ASCIM. During this trip he wrote in one of his diaries that he did not feel well for a few days and he had “a weird feeling on the left side of his chest.” Still, he stayed for two weeks after the convention ended and represented the ASCIM together with Indigenous leaders to different Mennonite organizations and took part in many meetings, to generate financial support for the programs of the ASCIM.

After one of these meetings he wrote in his diary: “I advocated for the ASCIM and had to defend myself again. The question they asked repeatedly is this: How long will the Indigenous people still need help?” Many of the Indigenous people have later expressed their gratitude for the faithful and dedicated service of “brother Jacob.” Hans Teichrieb of the Lenga clan expressed it this way at the funeral in 1985: “Many times we and brother Jacob have planned and worked together for the benefit of our people. Now we cannot thank him anymore for his self-less service but we want to express our gratitude to the family for the valuable service of brother Jacob among our people.”

An official recognition from the colony administration for Jacob B. Reimer’s contribution to the development of the Menno Colony was provided after his death with this inscription on his gravestone: “‘‘Dedicated to the honorable memory of Jacob B. Reimer’s longstanding and devoted service in the administration of Menno Colony. -- Chortitzer Committee, 1987.’”

On February 4, 1985, Jacob B. Reimer died suddenly of cardiac arrest on the way home from the office. They found him in his Jeep on the side of the road between Filadelfia (office) and Loma Plata (home), where the vehicle had stalled when his foot slid off the clutch. He was sixty-eight years old and his death was a big shock not only to his family but to the whole community. The funeral in Loma Plata was attended by about two thousand people, many of whom were his Indigenous friends.

Jacob’s wife Aganetha lived for another twenty-three years and died in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, on December 9, 2007, at the age of eighty-nine. As of 2017, the extended family of Jacob B. Reimer includes the five children, twelve grand-children, and fourteen great-grandchildren. The inscription chosen by the family for their father’s gravestone is taken from 2. Timothy 4:7: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.” Yes, in all those difficult and hard times, his faith and his family remained a priority.

**Endnotes**

2. At the beginning of the settlement, there was no centralized administration, but all matters were overseen by a group of elected committee members, who also facilitated the marketing of products and the buying of supplies. The chair of this committee was called “Vorsteher.” In the 1950s the committee was named the Chortitzer-Komitee, chaired by the Vorsteher (mayor) who was elected by all heads of households (men) in the colony. The appointed secretary and the administrator (later known as Oberschulze) were salaried. This committee was responsible for all colony affairs, except church matters. In 1950 Jacob B. Reimer was elected to be the Vorsteher (Oberschulze or mayor).
5. Jacob B. Reimer, 50 Jahre Menno.
The “3 R’s” in Northern Alberta:¹
A Mennonite Youth’s Start at a New School

By Peter Goertzen †

The bumping, squeaking sleigh and the jingle of the harness in the crisp November air were not new to me. On the Saskatchewan prairies north of Saskatoon we had often travelled by team and caboose to our tiny country school. But here in northern Alberta there were so many trees: poplars, willows, even spruce and jack pine. The narrow trail wound around clumps of bushes, cut along small fields and finally crossed over a farmer’s yard.

In the small clearing a cluster of log buildings, with a pure white column of smoke rising from one of them, was sharply outlined against the snow. A dog came running after us and barked at the team, while a woman carrying a pail of milk emerged from the barn. She was wearing traditional Old Colony Mennonite clothing: a dark long dress and a black shawl with a long fringe.

Perhaps I didn’t know it then, but I soon learned that this lady’s family had been among the earlier Mennonite settlers in the Fort Vermilion area. The very first settlers came from older farming communities in Saskatchewan and Mexico, and arrived in the late 1930s. In this rather isolated region of Alberta they had partially managed to revert back to a traditional lifestyle that they had once practiced on the Canadian prairies several decades earlier.

Everyone farmed (one could ‘take up a homestead’), spoke the same German dialect, attended the same church and socialized solely within the community. Naturally, the children too remained close to the heart of the community and attended separate schools that were staffed by local men.

I recalled spending a few weeks of a summer holiday at such a school while we lived in Saskatchewan. The teacher was a farmer who instructed us in reading, writing, catechism, and singing – all in German. But that had seemed a mere interlude in the course of regular, public school; here, in my new school in Alberta, the term ran from November to April, five days a week. I had also learned that many of the children who would be my classmates had never attended a public school at all.

I glanced around the wooden caboose once more. My older cousin John had gone out of his way to pick me up so that I might have the company of his two boys and the children of another family. They were all chattering away, excited about the first day of school and the prospects of a new teacher. But then, they knew what they were getting into; I wasn’t so sure. As I watched John put a few more sticks of wood in the tiny heater I realized I would be asking a lot of questions soon. In fact, I had one already: what on earth did the lad sitting next to me have in that long-necked brown bottle he was holding onto?

“So, here we are,” said John with a reassuring smile. I forgot about the bottle and turned to the hasty inventory of the buildings. On the right stood an L-shaped log house, complete with a sod roof and weeds showing through; the teacherage, I was told. On the other side of the winter trail were the school and barn, of the same construction. The only other building was a tiny outhouse built of slabs – for the girls, the boys used the barn, naturally.

Several teams, hitched to everything from hay racks to stone boats were already in the yard as we pulled in close to the barn. About a dozen children were busily collecting books, pencils and ‘Roger’s Syrup’ lunch pails and heading for the school. As soon as John stopped the horses we all piled out and joined them.

(Oddly enough, even on that short walk I noticed the ‘separation of the sexes’ which I had been told to expect. The boys and girls didn’t walk together but formed separate groups.)

Quickly we all made our way into the dim interior of the lean-to which served as a cloak room. Two tiny frost covered windows provided just enough light to distinguish rows of nails in the logs for our coats and caps. We boys stayed close to the entrance while the girls, I noticed, had an area at the far end of the room. Amid the general confusion of banging lunch kits, falling parkas (“The silly nail came out!”), and excited conversation, I began to look around for the teacher.

Actually I had been dreading the meeting and when my cousin pointed him out to me I felt that my worst fears were confirmed. The teacher was a tall, wide-shouldered man, dressed totally in black, with dark unblinking eyes and straight brown hair combed sharply back. He had just about the coldest stare I had ever seen and I wondered if the school year would seem very long.

But there wasn’t time to dwell on such matters. We’d moved into the classroom where a long row of desks, with benches attached, had been placed on either side of a center aisle. A glowing red air-tight heater commanded a spot roughly in the middle of the room. At the far end of the aisle, in front of the window, stood the teacher’s table and chair. Several books lay
on the table and two small blackboards were nailed to the end wall. I guessed, correctly, that these last items were the extent of teaching aids available in the school.

While I had been looking around the teacher had already started getting the children seated in some order. The most ‘advanced’ student was placed close to the teacher’s desk in the front row; then the second most ‘advanced’ and so on. Since some of the children had never attended a German school before and the teacher was new in the area himself, it was a bit difficult to determine who would sit where. However, after some shuffling around all the girls had been assigned seats on their side of the room and we, the boys, on ours.

From my seat against the wall I could see all the students in the room. The girls, waiting in quiet anticipation, were dressed in white shawls, with the ends crossed over in the front and tied in the back, and long dresses with matching aprons. The boys appeared more dubious. In fact, they looked downright sober in their dark pants and plaid, woolen shirts. I couldn’t help but smile, thinking that the only bright spot on the boy’s side was the white thermal underwear button which showed on each boy’s neck.

The teacher’s chair scraped on the rough floor and I turned to watch as he walked to the blackboard and wrote; Blumenort, November 21, 1951. (Suddenly my thoughts flashed to S.D. #4782, Rosalind, Saskatchewan and I wondered if my old schoolmates would, at that very moment, be singing ‘God Save the King’?) Back at the table, the teacher Mr. Loewen opened the old German hymnbook and announced the morning song. Carefully I paged through my mother’s hymnbook, which I was privileged to use, until I came to the correct number. One of the older boys was instructed to read the first stanza, which he did, and then we all joined in the slow, drawn-out mode of singing. Some of the songs were, respectfully, almost 400 years old. My only thought was ‘I can never learn to sing like that.’

After two verses we all rose to say the Lord’s Prayer. We remained standing to recite what I thought was a long poem. I learned that it was actually a set of rules of conduct for school children, written in verse form. But how was I to know? The German dialect we spoke at home was an awful lot different from the High German that was used in school.

This situation didn’t make things any easier when we settled down for a study period. I didn’t have a ‘reader,’ so my cousin shared his book with me. With David’s help and a little experience, I managed the A B C alright but very little else. I was grateful that this was about all the teacher expected – of me, anyway.

There were four grades, or reading levels. I was in the beginners group which studied in the Fibel (primer). The second level read from the Catechism, the third from the New Testament and the top students, of which there were few, from the entire Bible. Individually, with the teacher at our shoulder, we stood and read the material assigned to us.
As for myself, I unscrewed the lid of my mason jar for a drink of cocoa while listening to bits of conversation. “Next week we butcher hogs, three of them, and my father says I can stay and help.” “My little brother starts school tomorrow. He didn’t have any rubbers, but father will buy some in town today – at Stephens’ store,” “Last year I memorized the Catechism up to page 15 but I think I have forgotten some of it,” “…and she says in Mexico the teachers were always very strict.”

I found it all very interesting but as I finished off my last sandwich I thought again of Rosalind. During the noon hour my friends would be sitting in their varnished desks checking the big wall clock to see how much time was left for football. Or maybe they would be talking about music period when they would all play their tonettes. Certainly, they would be talking about the Christmas program coming up next month.

But in Blumenort the boys had decided to go outside and look for rabbit tracks around the schoolyard. We plowed through a lot of new snow but with no luck; the snare snares some of the boys had already prepared would just have to wait.

Our afternoon in class started out with a hymn and prayer, just as before. This time we also recited the entire multiplication table (I began to wonder how far this memorization thing would go). After a reading period just like the one in the morning, we turned to arithmetic.

Almost every child had a slate and some hard, grey chalk. On these miniature blackboards we did our calculations. The teacher handed out pages of assignments, ranging from simple additions to problems dealing with the sale of lumber, grain, and other farm products.

I had no problem with my work and was soon waiting for Mr. Loewen to come look at my slate. He was busy helping the beginners until one of the older girls asked a question. After talking to her he began checking everyone’s work.

He was kept busy and I found myself beginning to respect him. With no special training he was looking after some 45 students ranging in age from 6 to 14. Some of these student, like myself, had attended public (“English”) schools for a few years while others had missed out on a lot of education due to their families moving about or living in isolated areas where no schools existed. Outside of class there were janitorial duties which included moving all the desks out every Sunday when the building was used for church services. All things considered, I didn’t envy Mr. Loewen.

He had reached my desk by now and was rapidly checking our slates. A frown, a short question or a nod of approval was all the comment there was time for.

The short afternoon was beginning to fade. I noticed a few teams were already in the yard outside, waiting for the children. Rather quickly we got our songbooks out for one more hymn and a final evening prayer.

The New Year and Christmas Wish was a traditional feature of Christmas for Mennonite school children. The poem was generally memorized to be recited to their parents before they could open gifts at Christmas. The image is the cover of the author’s wish for his second Christmas in La Crete. Image Credit: James Driedger.
The days that followed varied little in routine. The exception was Friday, when we spent part of the afternoon answering questions from the Catechism. Once a student had memorized the 200 some odd verses, he would be promoted to the Bible reading group. Needless to say, there were enough challenges for me without trying for the ‘top grade’ that first year.

However, it wasn’t all work. Our lunch hour activities definitely improved after we all got to know each other. We played games like Prisoner’s Base, Last Couple Out, Too Late for Supper, Poison Tag, and when fresh snow permitted, Fox and Goose. None of these required any equipment and they could go on as long as we wanted them to. If we tired of games we’d go check our snares just inside the trees.

The rabbit population was exceptionally good that year. In due course I was shown how to make snares and where to place them over a trail. Being such a novice, I was quite pleased the morning we discovered my snare had caught one of the furry animals. When my older brother came to pick me up that day I nonchalantly heaved the frozen carcass onto the sleigh and took it home. Only thing was, I didn’t have the slightest idea what more to do with it – seems to me the cats got it! Nevertheless, I continued with the winter sport along with the other boys.

As we entered the month of December, the children started talking more and more about Christmas and the additional studies involved. I already knew about ‘additional studies,’ I thought. In Rosalind we had always put on a concert which included plays, recitations, monologues, and carols and all these required practice. But in Blumenort, I soon learned, there would not be a concert and certainly nothing as fancy as a play.

One afternoon Mr. Loewen simply wrote two hymn numbers on the blackboard and handed us copies of two poems. These, he said, we were to memorize for the coming holidays.

I was rather shaken up, especially after I had calculated the total number of verses that we’d be required to know. But, rather amazingly, after several weeks of practice at home and at school, I could recite all four items ‘off by heart.’

The day before Christmas dawned like any other except for an air of excitement among the students. Some wore ‘special good’ clothing and everyone had a gift for the teacher. Throughout the morning study period there were whispers about what one or the other had bought for Mr. Loewen and who knew all the songs and poems and who didn’t.

In fact, the only topic not covered was our reading material!

Endnotes
1 Peter Goertzen served on numerous boards associated with museum work and historical societies in Canada and as curator at Mennonite Heritage Village in Steinbach, Manitoba and Grande Prairie Museum in Grande Prairie, Alberta. Peter passed away at age of 66 in La Crete, Alberta in September of 2007. This short story about his introduction to school in northern Alberta after his family’s 1951 move from Saskatchewan was found in his many collections of historical and genealogical work. It was edited by James Driedger, the author’s nephew and first published in the Mennonite Historical Society of Alberta Newsletter Vol. XII, No. 1 (May 2009). Used with permission.
In Gäste und Fremdlinge, Bd. II., Mennoniten verwandeln Wüsten und Wälder, Kennert Giesbrecht has written a most interesting book in which he introduces readers to dozens of new colony Mennonite settlements in Latin America, including Belize.

This book, by its title and contents, is a sequel to the book by Abe Warkentin, also called Gäste und Fremdlinge, published in 1987. Warkentin’s book introduced readers to the first settlements by Old Colony, Sommerfelder, and Kleine Gemeinde Mennonites from Canada who migrated to Mexico and Paraguay beginning in the 1920s. Warkentin also included subsequent settlements in the state of Chihuahua in Mexico, as well as the first settlements in Belize, Bolivia, and East Paraguay up to 1987. In total, the number of colony settlements in 1987 was about fifty. Now, thirty years later, there are about 160 settlements. Thus, this book by Giesbrecht provides an introduction to about 110 new settlements, of which more than sixty are in Bolivia alone.

The new settlements founded after 1987 are located in various countries. In Mexico they are located in the states of Campeche in the south, Chihuahua in the north, and Tabascons along the eastern sea coast. A number of Old Colony settlements have been established in Argentina, where they are the southern-most Old Colony settlements in the world. New colonies in Belize, Paraguay, and Argentina, countries which already had Old Colony, Sommerfelder, and Kleine Gemeinde settlements, are noted. The author discusses the reasons for the “explosion,” as he calls it, of settlements in Bolivia after 2006. Giesbrecht includes a chapter on the new “wave” of settlements in Brazil, Peru, and Colombia. The book documents the tremendous expansion of Mennonite communities in Latin America. And this does not even include the tens of thousands of Mennonites who have migrated from the southern hemisphere to Nova Scotia, Ontario, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and to many states in the United States. These latter settlements are outside the scope of this book.

Giesbrecht’s book is written in German, however, an English translation is in preparation. By publishing the book in both German and English editions, Giesbrecht indicates his intent to communicate the stories of the colony settlements in the Americas to both insiders and outsiders.

The book is divided into eight chapters. The first chapter provides the background to the story of the colony Mennonite settlements in Latin America. It briefly traces the Mennonite story from the sixteenth century Menno Simons’ movement in the Netherlands, to Poland, Prussia, Russia, and Manitoba.

Readers get a good, albeit brief, overview of this history. This background section also tells the story of the migrations to Mexico and Paraguay from Canada in the 1920s, including a discussion of why they emigrated.

After this brief introduction, the following six chapters detail the stories in the various countries noted above. Chapter eight concludes the book with a number of essays on a variety of topics, including the effects of evangelization, what others say about colony Mennonites, and how colony Mennonites assist their neighbors.

Each of the chapters which tell the story in a particular country begins with a brief history of the colony, or colonies, in that country, indicates their number and size, their development, and includes a map. Much of the information about the various colonies is provided by the long captions to the many photos. In each chapter the author includes stories of human interest: tragedies, settlement experiences, farming accidents, robberies, kidnappings, and more.

Giesbrecht discusses the reality that the colony Mennonites, despite having lived in some of the countries for almost a century, still are seen as “visitors and strangers.” In some countries even getting legal citizenship is problematic. They are not accepted as part of the nation, but looked upon with curiosity and viewed as outsiders, even when they make major contributions to the national economy.

The many excellent, full-color photos make this an appealing book for young and old. The photos are stunning. They show people at work and play, young and old, groups and individuals, in the gardens or on the fields, driving horses or modern tractors. They portray fields, villages, and cattle. Since virtually all photos are in colour, they must have been taken relatively recently.

Kennert Giesbrecht is in a unique position, as editor of Mennonitische Post, to tell the story of colony Mennonites in Latin America. He has travelled extensively in these lands, visiting the communities about which he writes. Many of the photos are his. He knows the names of the people in the photos and appreciates and respects them. There is likely no one who knows these communities, and the people, as well as Giesbrecht. In writing this book, Giesbrecht makes a major contribution to a fuller understanding of colony Mennonites in the Americas.

John J. Friesen
Winnipeg, Manitoba
Peace and War: Mennonite Conscientious Objectors in Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union before World War II and Other COs in Eastern Europe

Lawrence Klippenstein
Winnipeg, MB, privately published, 2017, 367 pp, softcover, $30.00

Lawrence Klippenstein’s Peace and War: Mennonite Conscientious Objectors in Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union before World War II and Other COs in Eastern Europe represents the life work of a scholar, teacher, and archivist. The volume consists of a compilation of selected articles by the author and content from his thesis.

The complexity of practicing nonresistance – or not – among Mennonites in Russia during World War I and then in the ensuing Revolution, as described and analyzed by Klippenstein in this volume, offers a powerful read. Two overlapping accounts of nonresistance (or not) among Mennonites in Russia – in wartime and then during the Revolution – describe the conflicting and painful decisions, around a core tenant of Mennonite faith, made within a tight community. During the war many Mennonite men chose alternative service, first in forestry and then in medical aide. In the second part of the story, Klippenstein lays out the intense suffering endured by the Mennonites in the aftermath of the war, which was followed by the violence of the revolution: families eking out a starvation diet, raiders invading their farms, horrific accounts of destruction and murder in their villages, and for women, widespread rape and sexual violence.

Gleaning from archival sources and word-of-mouth accounts of the terror reigned down on Mennonite colonies, the author brings a powerful sense of actuality, of “being there,” to the work. But it is its focus on additional trauma that this particular Russian community faced around their divisive views on the issue of non-resistance that stands out in this particular account. Decisions made around such a central facet of Mennonite faith ranged from boldly enlisting, against the counsel of their church, during the war, to organizing the Selbschutz (self defense) of their villages, which included the use of arms to protect life and property, to holding steadfastly to the “Mennonite” way by choosing intense suffering and terrible losses without “resisting” the gruesome acts inflicted on them.

Klippenstein’s lengthy compilation of various works has room for the many archival details and other research that make his work so poignant, troubling, and thought provoking all at the same time. The interaction of “non-resistant” Mennonites with intense violence, recorded in gruesome statistics of lives lost, bodies maimed, and properties ruthlessly destroyed during the tumultuous period under review, makes this particular account exceptionally powerful.

The sheer volume of Klippenstein’s work, as well as the disparate topics that are included, makes for a somewhat disjointed read at times, although offset by the many gold nuggets found throughout. The wide array of historical information, not only about Mennonite Conscientious Objectors in Russia, but also a series of other pacifist groups in various contexts, would be well-served by dividing this work into two separate volumes.

Rosabel Fast
Toronto, Ontario

‘Die Mennonitische Post’ celebrates 40th anniversary

MCC-supported paper connects German readers from Canada to Paraguay

Jul 3, 2017 by Rachel Bergen and Mennonite Central Committee

Die Mennonitische Post, one of the last remaining German-language publications in North America, celebrated its 40th anniversary in June.

Mennonite Central Committee, which supports the Post, has longstanding relationships with Low German-speaking Mennonites in communities and colonies across North and South America.

MCC promotes German literacy and education through two publications: the Post, a newspaper published twice a month, and Das Blatt, a children’s monthly magazine.

Post editor Kennert Giesbrecht said the paper owes its long life to support from MCC and the 13,500 subscribers from Canada, the U.S., Mexico, Belize, Bolivia, Paraguay, Argentina and beyond.

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The paper’s goal, aside from promoting literacy and education, is to connect these communities.

“It’s all about informing people, broadening their horizons and building bridges between the Mennonite communities,” he said. “Almost half of the paper is letters where people write about what’s happening in the colonies and their lives.”

The Post founded Das Blatt in 1989 and published a number of German books. It also has a large book ministry, sending German books to Mennonite communities in Latin America. These three components make up Mennonitische Post Ministry.

Over the last 10 years the Post doubled its readership, largely because it’s now printed in four locations, making shipping easier and more cost-effective. The Post is printed in Steinbach, Man.; Asuncion, Paraguay; Santa Cruz, Bolivia; and Chihuahua, Mexico.

Giesbrecht said the Post hopes to expand and reach more isolated communities.

“Mennonite communities in Latin America are spreading out and starting new colonies in Peru, Colombia and Brazil,” he said. “It’s our goal to also reach those communities, too.”

For some of these colonies, the Post is one of the few periodicals received.

“The Post and the Blatt are widely accepted and trusted by Mennonite communities that would close their doors on many other organizations,” Giesbrecht said.

Through its Low German program, MCC assists families with applications for legal status and other resettlement issues. MCC helps Low German communities connect with local services and maintain relationships with leaders in the communities. This helps remove barriers between Low German communities and those around them.

In Latin America, MCC works with local leaders and organizations to address poverty, conflict, literacy, health and disasters. This includes operation of resource centers that provide reading material and other resources, and support of agricultural programs and disaster relief efforts, as well as addictions treatment facilities.

MCC News Release

Mennonite Heritage Centre Archives & Gallery Continue Under New Structure

Joint News Release by CTMS, CMU, and Mennonite Church Canada - February 3, 2017

The Mennonite Heritage Centre including its Archive and Art Gallery programs, has been reorganized under a new partnership and name.

Discussions over a number of months between Mennonite Church Canada (MC Canada), Canadian Mennonite University (CMU), and the Centre for Transnational Mennonite Studies (CTMS) at the University of Winnipeg culminated in a proposal for CMU to assume full ownership of the Mennonite Heritage Centre building, and programming of the faith-based Art Gallery, while the archives will be managed and funded by a three-way partnership of MC Canada, CMU, and CTMS. CTMS is a partnership between the University of Winnipeg’s Chair in Mennonite Studies and the D. F. Plett Historical Research Foundation Inc.

Per the proposal, CMU will own and maintain the Mennonite Heritage Centre infrastructure with staff of both the Archives and Gallery integrated in CMU’s human resources complement.

The proposal was accepted by MC Canada’s General Board at a January 13, 2017 meeting. The Mennonite Heritage Centre has been renamed to become “Mennonite Heritage Archives” (MHA) on June, 1, 2017, the transfer date to the new partnership.

Under the new structure, the full-time position of Director is being eliminated, while the archivist position is being expanded.
to full time. A committee representing the three partners will provide leadership to the MHA.

The partnership will seek to continue and to deepen the existing mandate of the Archives program, including present and future deposits to the collections of MC Canada and other Mennonite denominations. At the same time, it will expand the focus to include resources that document the transnational Anabaptist experience, including materials related to church communities in the global south, the Mennonite sojourn in Russia, and the Low German Mennonites of the Americas.

The Archives program has a distinguished record of service to the church community by storing and indexing congregational, area church, and national church records. These records, such as baptismal and church membership information, also constitute a primary source of data for church and family researchers and genealogists. The program also receives donations of records from education faculty, church leaders, and others.

The operations of the Art Gallery will be assumed entirely by CMU on June 1, 2017.

The Art Gallery is a bridge between Mennonites and other faith communities, featuring visual arts that share our own faith story within our community as well as bringing the faith stories of other religious groups to the Mennonite community. While the Gallery is based in Winnipeg, travelling exhibits have been featured in congregations, campuses, and events such as MC Canada Assemblies and Mennonite World Conference.

“CMU recognizes the significant value of both the Mennonite Heritage Centre’s Archives and Gallery as valuable resources for the Mennonite community,” says Gordon Zerbe, Vice President Academic at CMU. “CMU has a strong commitment to deepening the existing and ongoing mandate of these programs.”

“The new MHA will continue to serve our congregations as an important depository for their historic records. We encourage the continued and strong support of the MHA, not only through the contribution of congregational records, but also the financial support that makes this work possible,” said Coreena Stewart, Chief Administrative Officer for Mennonite Church Canada.

“CTMS is committed to preserving and telling the evolving Anabaptist story,” said Hans Werner, Executive Director, D. F. Plett Historical Research Foundation, Inc. “The archives are important in ensuring that the rich transnational story of Mennonite faith, life and community can be told for generations to come.”

The Archives at the Mennonite Heritage Center will now become the Mennonite Heritage Archives under a new three-way partnership between the Center for Transnational Mennonite Studies (CTMS), Canadian Mennonite University (CMU), and Mennonite Church Canada. Photo Credit: Mennonite Heritage Archives.

The Centre for Transnational Mennonite Studies is a Centre of the University of Winnipeg and partnership between the D. F. Historical Research Foundation, Inc. and the Chair in Mennonite Studies.

A Christian university in the Anabaptist tradition, Canadian Mennonite University offers undergraduate degrees in arts, business, humanities, music, sciences, and social sciences, as well as graduate degrees in theology, ministry, peacebuilding and collaborative development, and an MBA.

Mennonite Church Canada is made up of over 33,000 baptized members, 225 congregations and 5 area conferences.

The CMU, MHA, and CTMS communities got together informally to celebrate this new beginning for the archives on June 1, 2017.
2nd Annual CTMS Lectures Marks Public Opening of New Archives

The second annual CTMS lecture was held this year on October 5, 2017 to coincide with the official opening of the Mennonite Heritage Archives under a new three way partnership. The event, held at the Mennonite Heritage Archives building on the Canadian Mennonite University campus attracted a large crowd. After the Archives opening and greetings from the three new partners, Dr. Royden Loewen, Chair in Mennonite Studies and the Director of the Centre for Transnational Mennonite Studies presented a lecture entitled: “Hoax and Reality: Climate Change and the Mennonite Farmer in Global Context.” The lecture arose from Dr. Loewen’s recent project that looked at questions of Mennonites and land in seven different places across the world: United States, Bolivia, Indonesia, Siberia, Zimbabwe, Manitoba, and the Netherlands. The specific focus of this lecture was on how Mennonite farmers viewed climate change in the U.S., the Netherlands, Zimbabwe, and Indonesia.

Centre for Transnational Mennonite Studies Fall Conference

From October 19 to 21, 2017 CTMS hosted the Eighth Mennonite Writers’ Conference. Over the two and half day period Mennonite writers and literary critics focussed on the topic of “Personal Narratives of Place and Displacement.” The conference brought together a veritable who’s who of the Mennonite literary community from across the landscape both geographically and across genres. The conference was well attended and benefited from an engaged audience.

The final evening of the conference featured readings and conversation with Miriam Toews, the author of a number of novels situated within the Mennonite world, and Rhoda Janzen from the United States, the author of Mennonite in a Little Black Dress. Here Miriam Toews reads from her novel Irma Voth. Image Credit: Andrea Dyck.

Royden Loewen and Hans Werner having lunch with Johannes Dyck, Bibelseminar Bonn, Germany and Tatianna Plokhotnyuk, University of North Caucasus, Stavropol, Russia during the Writers Conference. The meeting began the initial planning on a Mennonite Conference tentatively set for Stavropol in 2020. Image Credit: Hans Werner.
Dear Friends:

With this mailing, the D. F. Plett Historical Research Foundation is pleased to be able to provide another issue of Preservings. Through it we hope to continue the vision of Delbert Plett to help readers better understand and appreciate their Mennonite heritage.

We also invite you to contribute articles, biographies, or news. You may know of people whose story should be told in these pages. Maybe grandparents, relatives, or neighbours’ stories would be of interest to our readers. Please contact us about writing such stories, or let us know who might be able to do so. We depend upon many willing writers for the content of the paper.

For subscriptions and address changes, write: Andrea Dyck, D. F. Plett Historical Research Foundation, University of Winnipeg, 515 Portage Ave., Winnipeg, Manitoba, R3B 2E9

For editorial matters, contact the editor: Hans Werner, telephone: (204) 786-9352 or email: plettfoundation@gmail.com

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