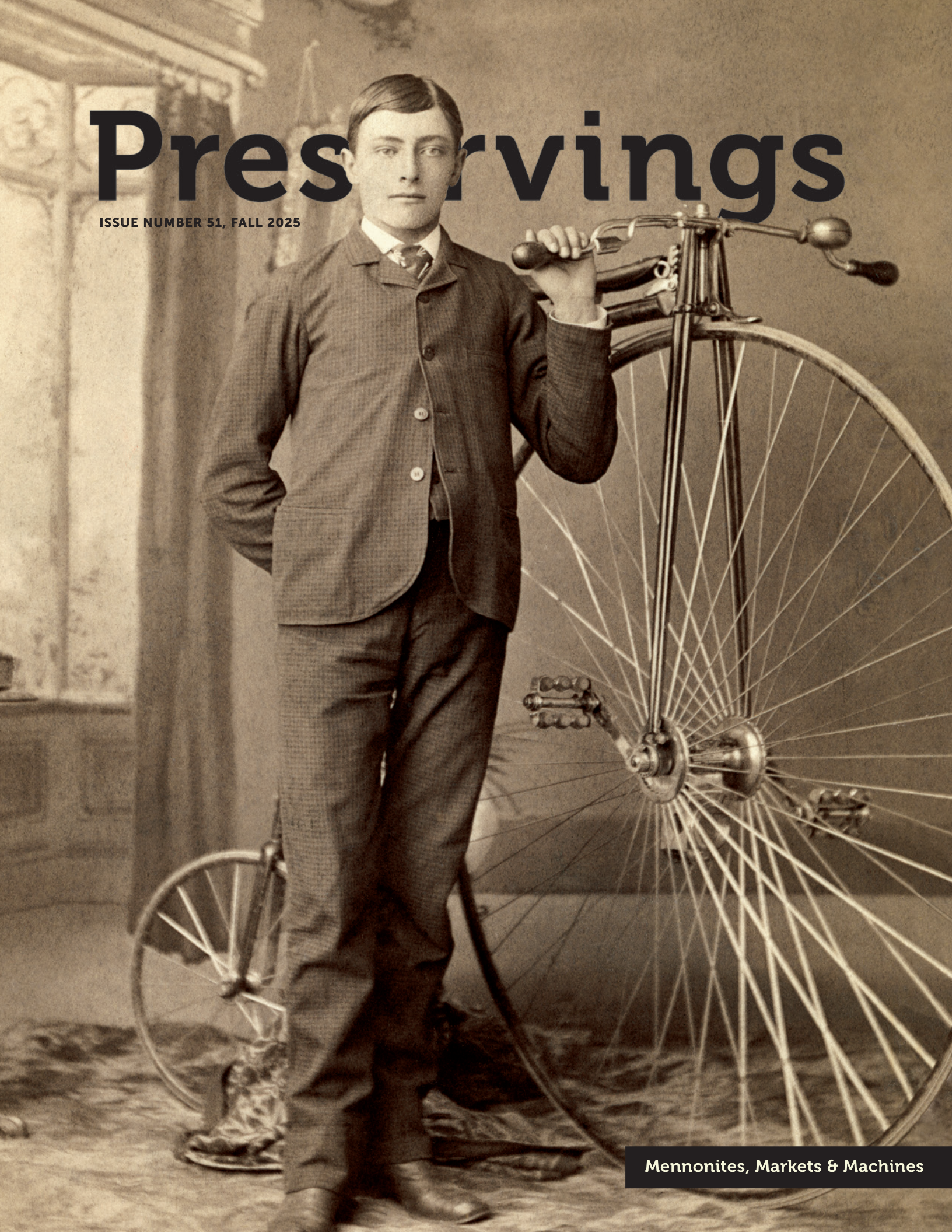


# Preservings



ISSUE NUMBER 51, FALL 2025

Mennonites, Markets & Machines

# Preservings

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EDITOR Aileen Friesen  
MANAGING EDITOR Jeremy Wiebe  
DESIGNER Anikó Szabó Design Inc.

PUBLICATION ADDRESS  
Plett Foundation  
University of Winnipeg  
515 Portage Ave  
Winnipeg, Manitoba  
R3B 2E9

ARTICLE SUBMISSIONS  
Aileen Friesen  
+1 (204) 786 9352  
ai.friesen@uwinnipeg.ca

SUBSCRIPTIONS  
To subscribe and pay online,  
visit [plettfoundation.org/preservings](http://plettfoundation.org/preservings)

ADDRESS CHANGES  
Jeremy Wiebe  
+1 (204) 786-9274  
info@plettfoundation.org

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## MISSION

To inform our readers about the history of  
the Mennonites who came to Manitoba in the  
1870s and their descendants, and in particular  
to promote a respectful understanding and  
appreciation of the contributions made  
by Low German-speaking traditionalist  
Mennonite groups of the Americas.

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## COVER IMAGE

David Peters II (?) standing beside  
a penny-farthing bicycle.

MAID: MENNONITE HERITAGE ARCHIVES, PP-PHOTO 514-90.0

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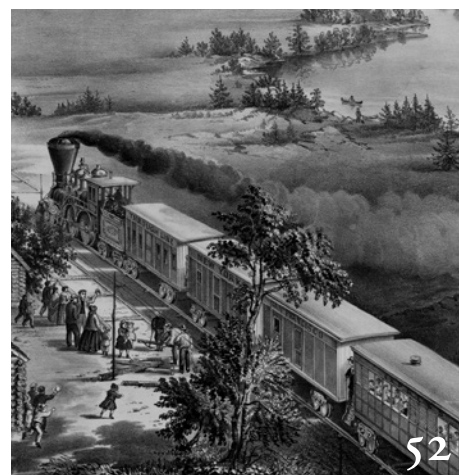
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# FROM THE EDITOR

Aileen Friesen

S ometime in the late 1880s, a young man posed with a penny-farthing bicycle in a photography studio, likely in southern Manitoba. Sources contradict one another regarding his identity; was he David Peters II, son of David Peters who ran a store in Gretna, or was he related to the Erdmann Penner family, also store owners, rumoured to have owned the bicycle? If the man was indeed David Peters II, how did the Reinlaender Church interpret his pose? Around this time David Peters I accepted the position of reeve of the Municipality of Douglas (later Rhineland), a decision that placed him in conflict with the Reinlaender Church congregation, ultimately leading to his excommunication. Reinlaender Church leadership frowned on bicycle ownership, although they did not excommunicate baptized members over it. How the Berghaler Church, to which the Penner family belonged, viewed bicycle ownership remains unclear; however, Abram S. Rempel of the more conservative Sommerfeld Mennonite Church posed in a Gretna photography studio in the late 1890s, after his baptism, without shame.

Much of our consideration of the relationship of Mennonites with machines exists within this framework: the cultural meanings attached to technology within the community. As Hans Werner notes in his article exploring the use of machines in Manitoba's West Reserve, machines became "markers of identity," especially for conservative Mennonites; differences within communities introduced by bicycles, the covered buggy, and other "luxury" items gave religious leadership pause. For Mennonites in imperial Russia, the association between machines and worldliness left with their coreligionists who emigrated across the Atlantic in the 1870s. For those who remained, restrictions were not imposed on bicycles, automobiles, and telephones, which were embraced by the wealthy elite of Mennonite estate owners and industrialists.

The articles in this issue remind us that Mennonite engagement with machines went beyond communally defined ascriptions of religious and ethical values. Machines, whether binders or silk wheels, bicycles, cars, trains, or ships, shaped economic life, revising or entrenching divisions of labour, encouraging the development of expertise, and connecting Mennonites to markets.

The articles by James Urry and Rachel Pannabecker on Mennonites and the silk industry illustrate these themes.

Innovators, like Abraham Janzen, used their technical expertise to develop silk reeling machines designed for domestic use, which expanded opportunities for women to increase production within their homes. Men might have invented and owned the reels, but women, in both the United States and imperial Russia, provided the essential labour for the proto-industrial manufacture of silk, becoming experts in various aspects of silk production.

This issue also highlights the importance of governments in facilitating or limiting access to markets for Mennonite agricultural and manufactured goods. Ingrid Peters-Fransen's article on tariffs and taxes illustrates this most distinctly: in the late eighteenth century, the Prussian state, for political reasons, declared a customs duty on exports from West Prussia through the port of Danzig, affecting both Mennonite farmers and merchants in the region. Peters-Fransen hypothesizes that the economic downturn caused by these taxes on trade contributed to the migration of Mennonites from the Vistula Delta into the Russian empire. Nataliya Venger, by contrast, demonstrates how in the nineteenth century the imperial Russian state promoted economic development by encouraging Mennonites to display their technological and agricultural innovations at exhibitions within the empire and internationally. The imperial state, as Urry shows, also contributed to the establishment of the silk industry in Mennonite colonies, as tsarist officials supported Mennonite initiatives to plant mulberry trees and raise silkworms. After the migration of Mennonites to the United States in the 1870s, the US Department of Agriculture decided to encourage the development of a domestic silk industry to address a trade imbalance and reliance on imports. Based on their reputation from imperial Russia, Mennonites benefitted from the establishment of a state-supported silk station, as Pannabecker describes.

Economic activity has been a foundation of Mennonite community life. In letters home to his family from North America, Wilhelm Ewert judged the places he visited based on the progress of industry and access to markets. According to P. S. Alekseev, Mennonites in Manitoba in the 1880s faithfully followed commodity prices from the Chicago Stock Exchange to avoid selling their grain prematurely. These sources highlight Mennonite historical market awareness, a topic which deserves more attention.



# MACHINES ON THE WEST RESERVE, 1870S–1920S

Hans Werner

Mennonites arriving in the Red River Valley of Manitoba in the 1870s settled the long-grass prairie on the eve of a dramatic transformation in agricultural work. Machines would replace people and animals for many farm tasks. The advent of machines would also change the energy balance away from wind, organic, and animal power to that provided by fossil fuels. The transformation, with its attendant tension between innovators and naysayers, was, however, largely uncontroversial. That is, until the advent of machines increased individual mobility and brought “the world” to the Mennonite village. It was then that machines began to take on religious and ethical meanings for West Reserve Mennonites. By the time of the migration to Mexico in the 1920s, machines had become controversial and their use had become a marker of identity.

In its basic form, the definition of work is moving an object a certain distance. Doing “work” requires energy, and the units used in physics for “work” and “energy” are the same. Early agriculture used primarily the wind and human or animal energy to do the work. Even here, different animals were used in different situations and times. The horse had replaced the ox by the time Mennonites settled in the Ukrainian lands of imperial Russia in the late eighteenth century, and in the early years of the Chortitza colony, the average farm had four or five horses. The first census taken in 1797 does not list any machines for individual farmers, but notes that the colony had ten windmills, a sophisticated machine that used the wind to do work.<sup>1</sup> Although the 1797 census listed only the animals kept by individual households, the 1801 census of the colony, taken almost a decade after the first settlers arrived, lists some rudimentary implements. Harrows, plows, looms, and spinning wheels were now listed, although they still relied on animal or human power to do the work.<sup>2</sup> By the time Mennonites left the Russian empire for the prairies of Canada, a lot had changed. Mennonites who settled the West

Reserve in Manitoba came with an eighty-year history of farming the steppes, a landscape not that different from the Canadian prairies, although with a milder climate. By the time of their emigration in the 1870s, machines were already transforming agricultural work.

The windmill was an immediate need for the new settlers, if the wheat they grew was to be milled into flour for bread, or feed for animals. Windmills had a long history among Mennonites. They had been used to pump water and grind grain in the Netherlands and Prussia, and to grind grain in the southern Ukrainian lands. A relatively complicated machine, the windmill converted the energy provided by the wind to rotate huge grindstones that ground the grain. The miller had to be skilled at employing the available wind to maximize the output of ground grain. Too strong a wind or variability in its direction put the mill at risk, and fires from excessive braking or brakes not holding the vanes were not uncommon.<sup>3</sup>

The Mennonite settler, like most colonial settlers, imagined the future of the grasslands of the Red River Valley as neatly ordered and cultivated fields that produced grain and forage crops. For that to be a reality, the first task was to break up the sod. Although they had come from an agricultural setting where horses supplied the draft power, oxen were called into service especially to break up the virgin grassland. John Warkentin’s landmark study of the Mennonite Reserves lists the advantages of oxen: they did not require oats for feed, were easier to shelter in winter, were cheaper, could walk on the land sooner in spring, and, most importantly in the early years, were stronger.<sup>4</sup> When Peter Wiens compiled his summary of the progress made in the West Reserve up to 1879, he listed 718 horses and 639 oxen in the thirty-six villages.<sup>5</sup> As the number of acres under cultivation increased, the disadvantages of oxen began to outweigh their benefits. The faster horse gradually took over.

Early machines on the West Reserve, such as windmills, looms, and spinning wheels, still relied on wind and human power. Yet even as farmers were breaking the prairie with their oxen and

The Reinland mill, owned by Johann Bergman, was the first to be built on the West Reserve, ca. 1877. MAID: MENNONITE HERITAGE ARCHIVES (MHA), PP-22 - PHOTO COL. 639-75.0

gradually switching over to horses, new machines were appearing to transform field, harvest, and processing operations. James Watt's improvements to the original Newcomen steam engine soon revolutionized work on the farms of the West Reserve. Watt had pioneered the inventions that allowed the steam engine to create rotary motion, a development that expanded the earlier use of steam engines to pump water out of mines. The first inroads of steam power in Mennonite agricultural enterprise were stationary engines used to grind grain for feed or flour. The rotary motion of the steam engine was transferred to the grinding mechanisms by a wide rubber belt. Some of the first businesses to be established when the town of Winkler emerged beside the railway tracks in 1892 were the steam flour mill owned by Jacob B. Dyck and William Peters, and a grist mill owned by Peter Harms.<sup>6</sup> A four-storey, well-equipped steam mill also operated in the village of Rosengart. By the 1890s, the windmill was on its way out and steam power for milling became the norm.

The 1880s and 1890s also saw the rapid adoption of a range of new seeding and threshing machines. The seed drill, which offered the advantage of placing the seed right in the ground where it could find moist soil and be protected from birds, arrived in the late 1880s. Binders with revolutionary tying technology eliminated much of the hand labour involved in cutting, stooking, and hand-tying the grain sheaves. The threshing machine was already available when Mennonites moved onto the West Reserve, and by 1877 there were both horse- and steam-powered threshing machines, often owned by an individual farmer but used by the entire village. According to Peter Wiens, in 1879, some four years after arriving, the Reserve had twelve steam-powered and seven horse-powered threshing machines.<sup>7</sup> The new machines required a complete reorientation of work for some. The new machines "were fragile, complicated machines, and they required knowledgeable individuals to operate them. The success of a threshing . . . operation rested on the engineer and the separator man. Their job was to constantly monitor the machines, oiling the bearings, lacing and setting the belts, and adjusting the engine and sieves to accommodate changes in the crop being fed."<sup>8</sup>

The threshing machine and its accompanying steam tractor did not compromise the values of the Mennonite villager to any extent. Threshing became even more of a community operation than before. Large crews were needed, and the entire village was put to work. Besides the specialized task of keeping the machines running, people were needed to haul the stooks and take away the threshed grain. Water and fuel had to be brought to supply the steam engine and the women and girls were called upon to feed the threshing gang.

The advent of steam power marked a significant change in the energy balance of agricultural work on the Reserve. Stationary steam engines used straw as fuel, a source of energy that, while not wind, animal, or human, was still organic and locally produced. Early steam tractors were primarily used to power the threshing machine, and since there was an abundance of straw, it was the fuel of choice.<sup>9</sup> Steam tractors had the advantage of being able to move "under their own steam," but it was a slow

process. In an 1897 letter to Peter Martens in southern Ukraine, Peter A. Elias, a West Reserve blacksmith and farmer who owned a threshing outfit, described the advantages of the steam tractor: "The self-propelled steam engine hauls the threshing machine, and frequently also the water wagon, to a convenient place for threshing."<sup>10</sup>

The steam-powered railway locomotive was another matter. Here the steam engine's rotary motion was transferred to wheels that propelled the entire steam engine along steel rails. Straw was not a practical fuel for a moving boiler, so coal became the fuel of choice, marking the debut of the fossil fuel era. While the steam locomotive was not owned or operated by Mennonites, it would have a significant impact on the agricultural economy. It brought products to the Reserve from faraway places and opened markets for surplus grain.

The 1870s Mennonites who settled the West Reserve were not averse to train travel. They had travelled by train through Europe, and the trip from Duluth on Lake Superior to the rail-head at Fisher's Landing near Grand Forks, North Dakota, was also by train. Their new home did not have train connections, but two years after their arrival on the West Reserve, the *Countess of Dufferin*, the first locomotive on the Canadian Prairies, was making its way by riverboat to Winnipeg. The railway was still some distance from the Reserve, but it immediately changed the economics of farming. The railway connected producers of surplus grain to distant buyers, and soon caravans of ox carts travelled the Post Road to Emerson. When the Southwestern and Pembina Mountain Branch went through the Reserve in 1882, the new railway towns of Gretna, Plum Coulee, Altona, and Winkler brought the steam locomotive and its cars even closer to West Reserve families.

While the railway improved the economic viability of West Reserve agriculture, it brought with it "the world," which for the more conservative of the West Reserve's Mennonites presented a problem. The Old Colony Mennonites frowned upon their members living in the railway towns. Frank Brown tells the story of P. H. Goertzen, who moved to Winkler and set up a store. He sent his children to the public school and was subsequently boycotted by members of his church. Although "the Anglo-Saxon and the Jewish citizens in town took compassion on Mr. Goertzen and patronized his store," it could not survive, and he eventually moved to Saskatchewan.<sup>11</sup> It was clearly not the machine itself that was the problem, but the temptations it fostered.

A similar situation involved the bicycle. While a fairly basic machine, it allowed for mobility on an individual level. Like many machines that would follow, acquiring ownership was related to financial ability and drew attention to individual difference rather than community unity. Peter A. Elias lamented the inconsistencies in the resulting discipline:

At the beginning there was also such a strong prohibition of bicycles that no one owning one was baptized. Baptized members who already owned a bicycle were not dealt with as strictly;

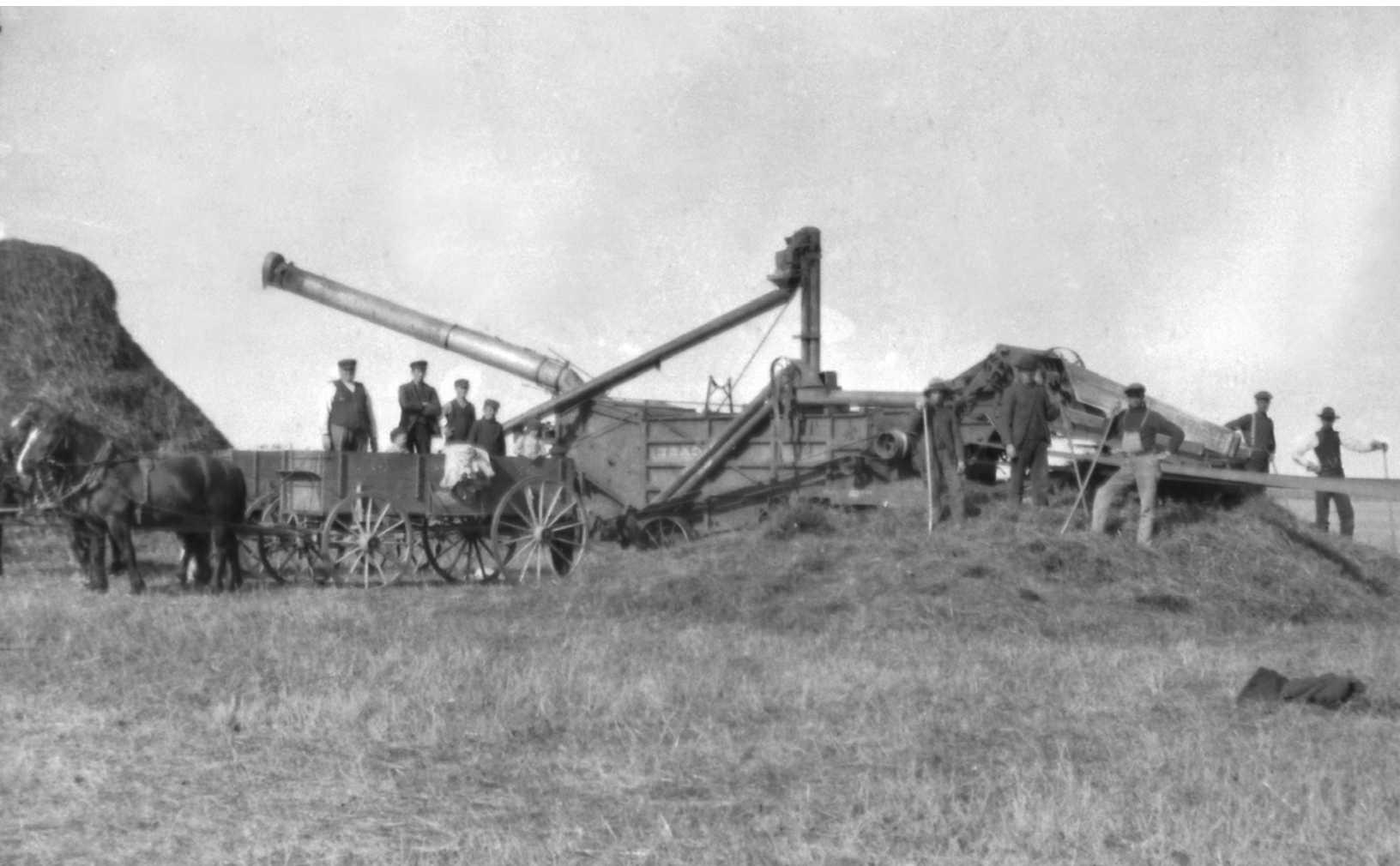
they were not to own one, but were generally not forced to get rid of them. As a result, non-baptized persons who owned a bicycle did not get rid of it, but merely refrained from using it until they were baptized. This led to a very uneven practice, since someone owning *and using* a bicycle was denied baptism. How could such a practice be maintained?<sup>12</sup>

The era of the steam tractor was relatively short. The advantages of the gas tractor over the steam engine paralleled those that favoured the horse over the ox. The gas tractor was lighter, faster, and used a more convenient fuel source. The gasoline tractor's ratio of power to weight was significantly greater than that of the steam engine. The 1915 Case 18-50 steam engine was rated at 50 horsepower and weighed approximately 10,000 kilograms. It travelled at 3.7 kilometres per hour. In contrast, an early model of the popular Fordson gas tractors weighed 1,324 kilograms and was rated at 20 horsepower; its top speed was 10 kilometres per hour.<sup>13</sup> The gas- or kerosene-powered tractor soon appeared in agricultural extension schools throughout Manitoba. In 1915, an agricultural school in Winkler introduced two gas tractors and a seeder that arrived by train. By the time of the migration to Mexico, gas tractors had become common, and Mennonites

arriving in Mexico with such modern equipment in the 1920s "were heralded by President Álvaro Obregón as the harbingers of northern progress, able to modernize agriculture on the broad mountain plains of the eastern Sierra Madre."<sup>14</sup>

The advent of gasoline as a commonly available fuel also stimulated the adoption of the automobile, a machine used almost exclusively for personal transportation. The March 11, 1909, issue of the *Morden Empire* reported that J. G. Loewen of Winkler had become an authorized dealer for the Columbus Automobile Company, and was expecting to receive a sample automobile soon.<sup>15</sup> The next year, an issue of the *Morden Chronicle* announced that Bernard Loewen had purchased a McLaughlin and that Frank Derksen from Winkler had "autoed" to Haskett and back in one day. He had, however, broken through the bridge at Blumenfeld and smashed his front wheels.<sup>16</sup>

The automobile raised the level of individual mobility considerably over the buggy, the bicycle, or the gas tractor. By the 1920s, automobile dealers were regular advertisers in West Reserve newspapers, and in 1928 the local council in Winkler removed the hitching rails on its Main Street.<sup>17</sup> Not everyone, however, adopted or considered the automobile an appropriate thing to own. The more conservative Mennonites, although



The 1880s and 1890s saw the rapid adoption of a range of new seeding and threshing machines on the West Reserve. MAID: MHA, 526-40-1.0



By the 1920s, automobile dealers were regular advertisers in West Reserve newspapers MAID: MHA, 526-10-4.0

they used gas tractors, continued to use the horse and buggy for personal transportation.

The household and farmyard were not immune from the transformation brought by machines. Although the spinning wheel and loom were machines of a sort, one of the first new machines to invade the household economy was the cream separator. By the early 1900s virtually every farm had one. Earlier methods of separating the cream from milk relied on gravity and time. The milk had to be set aside, allowing the cream to rise to the top of the container, where it was ladled off. The process was somewhat risky in that the milk might spoil if not attended to promptly. The cream separator was a centrifuge and for many years still driven by human power. Other than the tedious task of washing the cups and bowls, the process was faster and safer than the old gravity method. The separator would remain a feature of the milk room well into the 1950s,

and underwent little technological change during that time. The cream was shipped to the local creamery to be made into butter, while excess skim milk was fed to the pigs.

Tractors, binders, cream separators, threshing machines, and locomotives transformed West Reserve Mennonite life. By the 1920s, West Reserve Mennonites had adapted to many changes to the world they knew when they arrived in the 1870s. Although it is difficult to determine the milestones, gradually the more conservative embarked on a path to resisting technological change. They began to worry about the increased mobility offered by the automobile and tractor, and the accompanying threat to the sense of village and church unity that they believed was integral to a Christian life. Although he offers no specific source, Leonard Sawatzky suggests that around 1916 the Old Colony leadership began putting the brakes on the adoption of new machines. They banned the automobile and agreed “to arrest technological in agricultural machinery at the then existing level.”<sup>18</sup> When the more conservative elements left for Mexico and Paraguay in the 1920s, the brakes on adopting new technologies loosened even more for those remaining in Manitoba. The pace of change would continue with electrification, larger equipment, and the move from semi-communal village life to individual farms. The advent of the rubber tire in the 1930s would create controversy in Mexico, but not in the West Reserve.<sup>19</sup>

The new machines also heralded a dramatic change in the energy sources for work. Although hard work was still a feature of agricultural life, by the 1920s fossil fuels had replaced wind, the ox and horse, and straw as sources of energy. Coal had been the first imported source of energy, and for a time the coal dealer was an important business in town. But kerosene and gasoline soon replaced coal, other than for heating, and here it would be replaced before long by heating oil. At the end of the 1920s those processes of change were still underway, but the path towards reliance on fossil fuels had been set.

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Hans Werner is an associate of the Centre for Transnational Mennonite Studies and a senior scholar at the University of Winnipeg. He is the author of several books, including *The Constructed Mennonite* (2013).

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1 “Chortitza Mennonite Settlement Census for 14 October 1797,” Central State Historical Archive, St. Petersburg, fond 383, opus 29, delo 159, ed. Richard D. Thiessen and Glenn H. Penner, [https://mgr.mennonitegenealogy.com/russia/Chortitza\\_Mennonite\\_Settlement\\_Census\\_for\\_1797.pdf](https://mgr.mennonitegenealogy.com/russia/Chortitza_Mennonite_Settlement_Census_for_1797.pdf).

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8 “TimeLinks: Steam Tractors,” Manitoba Historical Society, <https://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/>

[features/timelinks/reference/db0067.shtml](https://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/features/timelinks/reference/db0067.shtml)

9 “TimeLinks: Steam Tractors.”

10 Peter A. Elias to Peter Martens, Apr. 29, 1897, in *Voice in the Wilderness: Memoirs of Peter A. Elias (1843–1925)*, trans. and ed. Adolf Ens and Henry Unger (Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 2013), 144.

11 Frank Brown, *A History of Winkler* (Winkler: pub. by the author, 1973), 129.

12 Peter A. Elias, “Memoirs,” in *Voice in the Wilderness*, 64. Emphasis in the original.

13 Steam tractor manufacturers were reluctant to specify the weights of their products, fearing that farmers would find them too heavy. The weight for the Case 18–50 is an estimate from a table provided on the Smokstak antique tractor forum at <https://www.smokstak.com/>. The specifications for the Fordson tractor are from <https://www.yesterdaystractors.com/>.

14 Royden Loewen and Ben Nobbs-Thiessen, “The Steel Wheel: From Progress to Protest and Back Again in Canada, Mexico, and Bolivia,” *Agricultural History* 92, no. 2 (Spring 2018): 175.

15 *Morden Empire*, Mar. 11, 1909, 8.

16 *Morden Chronicle*, Nov. 24, 1910, 8.

17 *Morden Times*, June 6, 1928, 4.

18 Harry Leonard Sawatzky, *They Sought a Country: Mennonite Colonization in Mexico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 352.

19 See Loewen and Nobbs-Thiessen, “Steel Wheel.”

# SILK REELING AMONG MENNONITES

## An Introduction

James Urry and Rachel Pannabecker

It may appear strange that Mennonites, ostensibly “plain” in life and dress, were associated with a luxury item such as silk, even though Dutch Mennonites had long been involved with the silk industry.<sup>1</sup> The involvement of Mennonites in silk production in imperial Russia and in North America is occasionally referred to in the literature but has not been investigated in detail. Almost nothing has been said about Mennonite invention and use of silk reelers or their implications for developments in imperial Russia and America.

Sericulture, or farming silkworms, is the first stage in producing yarn for the silk textile industry.<sup>2</sup> It is based on the cultivation of a domesticated moth (*Bombyx mori*) that can produce between 350 and 500 eggs, with 4,000 eggs providing a kilogram of silk. With the warmth of spring the eggs hatch into voracious caterpillars that feed principally on mulberry leaves, shedding their skin through four molts as they grow to ten thousand times their original size. In preparation for the pupa stage, caterpillars form a cocoon by extruding a liquid that solidifies into one long, continuous filament.

Before harvesting the filament can begin, cocoons that are too small, damaged, stained, or pierced by the moth are set aside. The cocoon must be reeled before the pupa changes into a moth, approximately two weeks after the cocoon is completed. If more than a week has passed since the cocoon’s completion, the pupa must be “stifled” by immersion in boiling water, exposure to steam, or drying in the sun to prevent the moth from emerging. Otherwise, the pupa is killed during the process of reeling. The goal of reeling is to unwind the cocoon’s continuous filament to achieve a long, very fine yet durable thread that is smooth and uniform in diameter and ready to be twisted into yarn and woven into fabric.

Although sericulture first developed in China over four thousand years ago, the knowledge and machines required to produce silk gradually spread westwards. In Europe, silk industries existed



A Mennonite woman at a spinning wheel in the 1980s.

in various medieval states and by the eighteenth century were well established in Italian provinces, Spain, and France. Silk clothing was costly to produce and consequently was a luxury commodity, particularly prized by aristocrats. Many European

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The transition from a cottage industry to factory production involving more complex machines foreshadowed the rise of other industries.

rulers were eager to develop local silk industries and produce such a valuable product. At first silk production was a cottage industry and silk reeling involved simple machines sufficient to reel filaments from cocoons to obtain raw silk. During the eighteenth century, improvements to reeling machines were developed in areas of Italy and France to produce finer, quality yarn that could be woven and dyed into valuable textiles. Silk industries of the regions of Piedmont in Italy and Lyon in France were particularly advantaged by these new technologies. In the nineteenth century, as the Industrial Revolution advanced, mechanical innovations in other textile industries such as cotton, linen, and wool contributed to further innovation in the design and manufacture of silk machines.<sup>3</sup> Inventors worked to simplify the production of raw silk through improved reeling machines to meet the demands of an industry increasingly concentrated in factories. Gradually, the industry transitioned from domestic production to centralized reeling and weaving centres.

These technological developments had significant consequences in the political, economic, and social lives of silk producers. Those who controlled the people and machines involved in producing this valuable material wished to protect

and develop their investments. At first, these were rulers of the day, and technological advances were copied or even stolen; later, businessmen with capital funded innovation and economic development. Skilled workers were encouraged to relocate; many were women, especially those involved in reeling. The transition from a cottage industry to factory production involving more complex machines foreshadowed the rise of other industries, the growth of industrial towns, and major changes in forms of work. Mennonites might not have worn the colourful, fashionable clothing made from the silk they produced, but their involvement in its production heralded other changes to their lives.

For their assistance we thank Ernest Braun, Conrad Stoesz, Leonard Friesen, Renae Stucky, John Thiesen, Renae Peters, Peggy Goertzen, and the Peabody Historical Society.

<sup>1</sup> Cor Trompetter, *Agriculture, Proto-Industry and Mennonite Entrepreneurship: A History of the Textile Industries in Twente, 1600–1815* (Amsterdam: NEHA, 1997); and Peter Kriedte, *Taufgesinnte und großes Kapital: Die niederrheinisch-bergischen Mennoniten und der Aufstieg des Krefelder Seidengewerbes* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> See Robert N. Wiedenmann and J. Ray Fisher, *The Silken Thread: Five Insects and Their Impacts on Human History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), sec. 1.

<sup>3</sup> For a general overview, see Giovanni Federico, *An Economic History of the Silk Industry, 1830–1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

# THE TECHNOLOGY OF A FORGOTTEN INDUSTRY IN IMPERIAL RUSSIA

James Urry

Many Mennonites who moved to imperial Russia from Prussia starting in 1789 were identified as weavers, mostly of linen, and they brought with them spinning wheels and looms.<sup>1</sup> Linen was prepared from flax and woven along with wool into cloth, but migration accounts make no mention of silk. The tsarist administrator of foreign colonists, Samuel Contenius, promoted the establishment of a silk industry through planting mulberry trees, the food source of the silkworm. Reports from Chortitza mention silk production beginning in 1807, and between 1813 and 1819 mulberry planting doubled.<sup>2</sup> In Molotschna after 1804, early attempts to establish a silk industry by mulberry planting failed, but the trees became part of the afforestation program on the open steppe. Later, in 1828, the reformer Johann Cornies told Contenius that he planned “to promote sericulture,” and he began to gather books and journals on the subject.<sup>3</sup> During the nineteenth century numerous publications concerning mulberry cultivation and founding silk industries were published in German and other languages. In 1831, the administrator of foreign colonists instructed Mennonites in Chortitza and Molotschna to form local societies “for the Advancement and Dissemination of Forest Trees, Orchards, Sericulture, and Viticulture.” The instructions included a requirement to establish a library of German sources on agriculture and to acquire a silk reeling machine.<sup>4</sup>

Most accounts identify Altonau as the first Molotschna village to cultivate mulberries principally for sericulture, and by 1835–36 it became a centre of the silk reeling industry. The development of the industry intensified with the formation of the Ministry of State Domains in 1837, when the government provided scientific advice on sericulture and mulberry plantations expanded rapidly. By 1840 over 64,400 acres of Chortitza were planted with 13,000 mulberry trees; thirty-six families were raising silkworms and ten were reeling silk; by 1851 this had

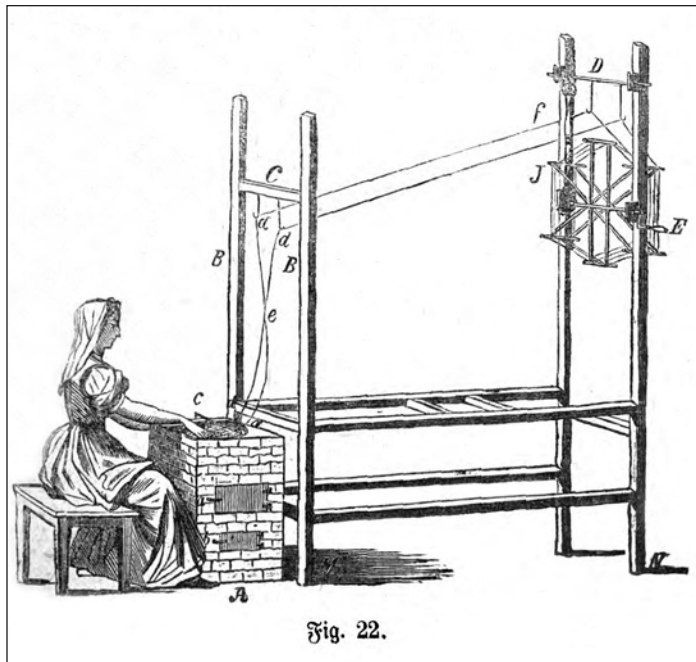


Philipp Wiebe with family. Wiebe was a member of the Sericulture Committee, established in 1846.

increased to almost 407,000 acres, 260,000 trees, and over a thousand families raising silkworms and 340 reeling silk. In Molotschna sericulture expanded even faster.<sup>5</sup> By 1842, 60,000 mulberry trees were planted and seventy-one families bred silkworms; by 1847 over 300,000 trees were planted and over five hundred families raised silkworms; by 1850, almost nine hundred families raised silkworms.<sup>6</sup>

MENNONITE LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES, BETHLEHEM COLLEGE 2007-0038

In 1846 the Moscow Agricultural Society, founded in 1819 and connected with the Ministry of Agriculture, established a Sericulture Committee, and Cornies's son-in-law, Philipp Wiebe, became an active member.<sup>7</sup> Government experts were sent to study Mennonite involvement in the industry and foreign visitors praised the Mennonites' activity.<sup>8</sup>



The tsarist state took an interest in new methods of reeling at home and abroad.

## THE TSARIST STATE AND SILK MACHINES

In the early 1840s, in order to obtain better supplies of silk yarn for textile factories mostly situated around Moscow, government departments investigated new methods of reeling at home and abroad. This sudden interest in silk machines was noted in France.<sup>9</sup> A French reeler was purchased from silk expert Stéphane Robinet and sent to Moscow where it was examined and "improved" by the Sericulture Committee's engineer, Paul Krippner.<sup>10</sup> A machine invented by a German silk factory owner in St. Petersburg, Heinrich Graf, was also investigated. Graf came from Mühlhausen, a town on the Rhine with an established silk industry, and his machine reduced the stages needed to produce silk yarn by combining and twisting the thread. Previously this had involved two processes. Graf's machine also improved the quality and strength of the yarn. His machine was examined by members of the Imperial Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg and their positive opinion was later confirmed by French experts.<sup>11</sup> Graf's machine, however, was large and complicated; he also had copyrighted his invention in imperial Russia and France, which increased its potential cost.

In 1848, the Sericulture Committee purchased a newly invented reeling machine from Paris designed by a Venetian, Luigi Locatelli.<sup>12</sup> Locatelli's machine attracted the attention of the committee because its small size meant it was easy to transport and could be converted into a more complicated reeling

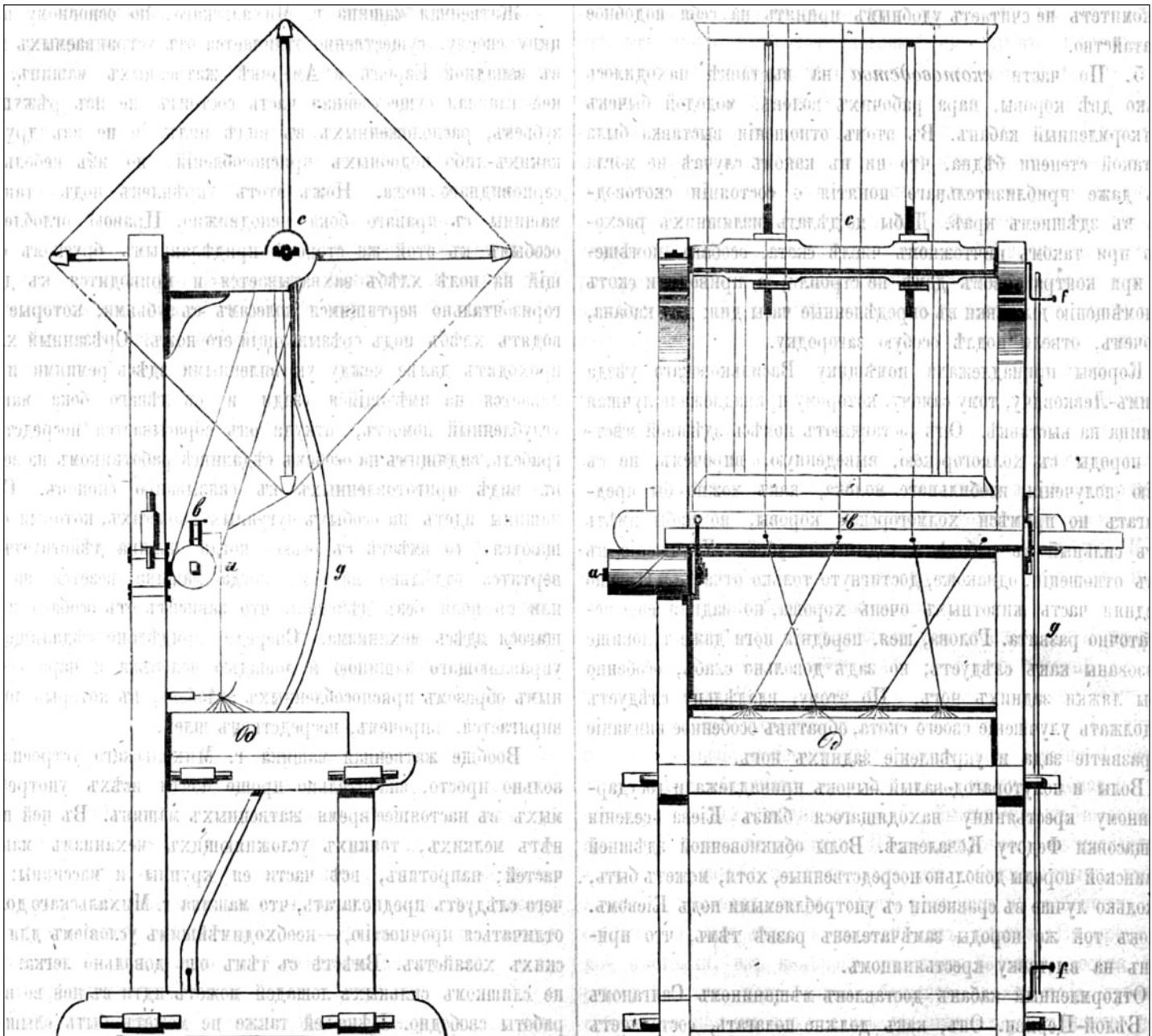
machine.<sup>13</sup> It was tested and examined by Krippner, who constructed a copy that further simplified its movement. The choice of the machine and its modification reflected the desire of the Ministry of State Domains to develop the silk industry among state peasants and military settlers. This required a small, simple machine that could be easily used by peasants in their homes, as many foreign machines were considered to be too large, complex, and costly. However, a detailed examination of Locatelli's machine by a French expert criticized its complexity and cost.<sup>14</sup> It appeared the tsarist state would have to look to home for a simple machine.

## MENNONITE MACHINES

For many years Cornies sold wool and later silk through an agent in Moscow connected with the Sericulture Committee; he secured a copy of their improved Locatelli machine, but it proved unsuitable.<sup>15</sup> In August 1838 he informed a tsarist official that he had decided to construct a reeler; by 1841 two reeling machines had been installed, one with Gerhard Enns in Altonau and another with Claas Wiebe in Münsterberg, and in early 1843 Cornies noted there were three machines in the Molotschna district.<sup>16</sup> Eager to develop industries in Molotschna, Cornies established a centre for skilled craftspeople in Halbstadt that attracted workers, especially from Prussia.<sup>17</sup> Among these was a clockmaker, Abraham Janzen, who relocated to imperial Russia around 1839.<sup>18</sup> Later Janzen and at least one other Mennonite, Peter Dyck from Schoeneberg, constructed a silk reeler, possibly after examining Locatelli's machine and consulting one of the many books on silk and reeling machines published around this time. One such source was by Wilhelm von Türk, a Prussian official and promoter of the silk industry who founded a silk factory near Potsdam.<sup>19</sup> Following a visit to Italy in 1827 to investigate its silk industry, von Türk commissioned Ferdinand Queva, a Berlin engineer, to build a large reeler based on the design of Heinrich (Enrico) Mylius, the owner of a silk mill near Milan that von Türk had visited.<sup>20</sup> As the Prussian factory lacked a reliable source of power, a smaller and cheaper machine intended for use in peasant households was produced.<sup>21</sup> Illustrated in the 1835 and 1843 editions of von Türk's books, it met, in principle, the needs of the tsarist state.<sup>22</sup>

Janzen's experience constructing clocks equipped him well for the task of designing and making a reeler. A clock mechanism with cogs and wheels calibrated to produce regular, continuous movement could easily be designed to operate a reeler. Although no plans, models, or examples of Janzen's first machine apparently exist, some idea of what it might have looked like and how it operated can be reconstructed from contemporary sources.<sup>23</sup> Like von Türk's machine, it consisted of an upright, wooden frame with a mechanism set in motion by a foot pedal. The cocoon threads were drawn through a basin of warm water onto a wheel. It likely resembled the illustrations published in a Russian agricultural journal of a reeler that claimed to improve Janzen's machine by replacing its metal cogs with simple wooden parts.<sup>24</sup>

Early models pulled two threads from cocoons placed in a



Clockmaker Abraham Janzen constructed a silk reeler that others improved by replacing its metal cogs with simple wooden parts.

warmed basin, but later models could draw threads from eight and even ten cocoons. In 1846, Janzen's machine was awarded a prize at an agricultural exhibition and a leading silk manufacturer in Moscow purchased two of his machines.<sup>25</sup> Other Mennonites also designed reelers, although it is unclear how these machines were regarded and if they were generally manufactured.<sup>26</sup>

Janzen's machine initially was designed for peasants, but Mennonites became the principal users. Early models tended to produce damp threads as the basin was too close, so Peter Lepp from the village of Einlage in Chortitza redesigned it for the mechanic Peter Dyck to build.<sup>27</sup> Lepp's remodelled reelers and various improved parts were sold to non-Mennonites; a complete machine could be purchased in Odessa (Odesa) in the later 1850s for 20 rubles.<sup>28</sup> Lepp was Janzen's nephew and had been apprenticed to him in Prussia before Janzen moved to

imperial Russia. At Einlage, Lepp constructed a foundry where he could cast metal parts, experimented with dyes, and built a silk reeling factory. According to a later source, Lepp constructed a circular reeler operating a hundred bobbins, and this may have been connected with his silk factory development, as in Italy similar machines operated in silk mills.<sup>29</sup> Within a few years, however, Lepp began to manufacture agricultural machines as Mennonites turned to large-scale grain cultivation, particularly wheat intended for export.

## WOMEN AND SILK MACHINES

References to silk in Europe overwhelmingly name men as the producers of silk, presumably because they owned the means of production; however, women typically performed most of the labour. As in Western Europe, Mennonite women in imperial

Russia did most of the work involved in producing silk, from caring for moth eggs and feeding caterpillars, often with the help of children, to preparing cocoons and particularly the skilled work of reeling.<sup>30</sup> They carried ultimate responsibility for the quantity and quality of the final yarn.

Women who immigrated from Prussia brought the skills of spinning wool and preparing flax yarn, while men mostly wove cloth. Such work occurred in households, and in the case of silk, as only yarn and not cloth was produced, this division of labour was not followed. Operating a silk reeler involved greater skill than using either a spindle or a spinning wheel, especially as silk machines became larger and more complex. Spinning was a seasonal activity carried out in winter once sheep had been sheared or flax harvested, but for some the increasing mechanization of silk production meant it became a full-time occupation.

Elsewhere in Europe, the mechanization of the silk industry and its increasing concentration in workplaces outside homes involved changes in gender relations, particularly among young women expert in reeling.<sup>31</sup> An 1852 report on Molotschna noted that reeling was “a special activity in which, with few exceptions, only young girls participate.”<sup>32</sup> Married women with children had to manage the household, but some still reeled or instructed younger women. The development of the industry and the need to improve the quality of yarn resulted in the work of such women being recognized. In 1852, a widow, Catherine Klassen of Krons Garten, was recommended for an award for her thirty-six years’ service reeling silk and teaching younger girls her skill.<sup>33</sup> Before 1870, Margaret Wall won a prize for reeled silk at a Kharkov (Kharkiv) fair.<sup>34</sup>

## PROTO-INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENTS

In 1843, an article in a German trade journal argued the silk industry needed to be centralized if it were to produce more thread of a better quality, and that this could only be achieved in “special facilities where active, continuous supervision takes place.”<sup>35</sup> This reflected a trend in all major European silk manufacturing areas, such as northern Italy, and was actively promoted in the contemporary literature concerned with establishing profitable silk industries.<sup>36</sup>

Cornies had been made aware of the problem with quality by his agent in Moscow who sold his wool and silk. In 1846, Stéphane Robinet examined a sample of silk thread produced in Tiegenhagen, Molotschna, and concluded it resembled “country silk,” a somewhat coarse silk, spun in households, inferior to the fine silks from silk reeling factories.<sup>37</sup>

At least as early as 1843, Cornies considered building reeling centres and a cloth factory in Molotschna and communicated with Mennonite silk factory owners in Krefeld, Prussia. A leading tsarist official, however, told him to abandon the idea of a cloth factory and concentrate on sericulture.<sup>38</sup> Cornies eventually constructed a building for young girls to be instructed by experts in reeling.<sup>39</sup>

Although some claim that Cornies’s efforts ended with his death, his son-in-law Philipp Wiebe enthusiastically con-



WIKIMEDIA COMMONS: FILE:FRIEDRICH\_HENNRICH\_VON\_FRIEDRICH\_FREIHERR\_VON\_DER\_LEYEN.JPG

Mennonites in imperial Russia communicated with Mennonite silk factory owners in Krefeld, Prussia. The von der Leye family was one of the major silk producers in the town.

tinued his work. In the early 1850s, he established a system that encouraged people in Molotschna to bring cocoons raised in their households to reeling centres where the quality of reeled silk could be monitored. On his Yushanlee estate, Wiebe constructed “a massive building” and installed five of Janzen’s latest, “improved” reeling machines and a Graf reeler.<sup>40</sup> Silk reeling was just one proto-industry Wiebe established at Yushanlee; the others included a brick and tile factory and a tobacco processing centre.<sup>41</sup>

In the factories a more authoritarian system existed, and Franz Klassen, an established silk producer, was appointed as an inspector to oversee production. The rules required the thread to be produced to a “uniform thickness” and quality. Anyone who produced poor quality silk was forbidden “to engage in the business.” As the rules required producers to reel eight or ten cocoons, this would require them to invest in a larger Janzen model that most could not afford.<sup>42</sup> For many, reeling yarn was no longer a household occupation engaged seasonally, although some households installed more than one machine and reeling became a full-time occupation.<sup>43</sup> Increasingly, however, silk reeling became a proto-industry employing skilled operators and machinery capable of producing quality yarn in order to ensure maximum returns in markets beyond the colony.<sup>44</sup> Those listed as the main producers of silk and their locations changed between the 1850s and the end of the 1860s. The list included Jacob

Siemens (Elisabeththal), Jakob Neufeld (Halbstadt), Peter Penner (Halbstadt/Grossweide), Johann Bergmann (Tiege), Gerhard Peters (Ladekopp), and Peter Friesen (Rosenort).<sup>45</sup>

Silk machinery, invented, built, and controlled by Mennonites, changed lives. In Molotschna, poorer households were reduced to tending eggs and caterpillars to the cocoon stage. In 1851 the number of households involved in sericulture and reeling in Molotschna was 1,188; by 1866 it was 547. In Chortitza, with a smaller population than Molotschna and fewer centres, household production continued for longer.<sup>46</sup>

## TROUBLED TIMES

Mennonites often exhibited their silk locally and, importantly, internationally.<sup>47</sup> At the London International Exhibition of 1862, the textile factory of Clementz, Löh, & Co. from Quellenstein, Russian Livonia, near Riga, exhibited fabric made from yarn reeled in Halbstadt.<sup>48</sup> At the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1867, the majority of Mennonite products displayed were silk.

This might indicate the industry was flourishing, but it was not. Despite the construction of factories and Philipp Wiebe's tireless work to develop the industry in Molotschna, it faced numerous challenges from the mid-1850s onwards.<sup>49</sup> The Crimean War, fought close to the Mennonite colonies, disrupted the region's economy. This was followed by diseases that infected silkworms, with devastating consequences for not just Mennonites but the entire European silk industry.<sup>50</sup> Like producers elsewhere, Mennonite breeders turned to obtaining eggs and cocoons from Asia, as the products of two Mennonite Paris exhibitors in 1867 indicate. The opening of Japan in the 1850s resulted in increased trade, and the export of silkworm cocoons as raw silk became a major factor in industrializing the country.<sup>51</sup> The Mennonite silk industry was also challenged from within as imperial Russia's conquest of Central Asia gave manufacturers access to much larger supplies of yarn. The global trade in silk was boosted by the invention of other machines, especially steamships and trains, which ensured the rapid movement of products between Asia, Europe, and North America.<sup>52</sup>

## CONCLUSION

An 1859 French governmental report on the silk industry in imperial Russia noted that only the Mennonites had established a viable commercial venture, but doubted its financial rewards and whether sufficient labour were available for it to succeed. It suggested Mennonites considered "agriculture much more advantageous" and sericulture a secondary occupation, almost a form of "recreation."<sup>53</sup> Agriculture involved cultivating wheat to feed the increasing populations in industrial, urban Europe. Once again, technological innovations in transport helped expand trade, but in grain not silk.

The production and processing of grain became increasingly mechanized and Mennonites became important manufacturers of agricultural machinery and flour millers. Between 1860 and 1869 the value of agricultural machinery produced in Chortitza

increased sixfold, from 6,228 rubles to 38,729 rubles. Much of the financial capital that permitted Peter Lepp to establish his agricultural factories initially came from his involvement with the silk industry. Exactly when Lepp ceased manufacturing reeler and their parts is unclear, but it was reported that he started building agricultural machinery in 1854 with capital of 400 rubles and his returns grew from 10,000 rubles in 1861 to 65,000 rubles by 1872.<sup>54</sup> Lepp died in 1871, but his business grew into the major company of Lepp and Wallmann. No doubt some buildings that once housed female reelers were retooled to produce agricultural machines operated by men. In Molotschna, one agricultural machine factory, that of Franz and Schröder in Neu-Halbstadt, was built on the site of a silk reeling establishment.<sup>55</sup> The missing connection between the development of Mennonite clock-making and the agricultural machine industry is the silk industry with its reeling machines.

During the 1870s the new steamships and trains used to export grain and transport coal and iron ore also aided the Mennonite immigration to North America. Following its defeat in the Crimean War, the tsarist regime initiated a series of fundamental reforms of society. Whereas previously Mennonites had received considerable government support, official attention now shifted elsewhere. By the early 1870s it became clear that the Mennonites would not be exempted from the major reform involving military conscription. Some, true to their nonresistant principles, sought a new land and carried in their baggage mulberry seeds, hoping to re-establish a silk industry.

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James Urry is a retired anthropologist and historian in Wellington, New Zealand.

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1 Benjamin Heinrich Unruh, *Die niederländisch-niederdeutschen Hintergründe der mennonitischen Ostwanderungen im 16., 18. und 19. Jahrhundert* (Karlsruhe: pub. by author, 1955).

2 Official government figures in "Statistische Notizen über die Kolonien in Südrussland," *Hertha: Zeitschrift für Erd-, Völker- und Staatenkunde* 4, *Geographische Zeitung* (1825): 27, 30; and George L. von Reiszitz and Friedrich Wadzeck, *Glaubensbekenntnis der Mennoniten und Nachricht von ihren Colonien, nebst Lebensbeschreibung Menno Simonis* (Berlin: August Rücker, 1824), 382.

3 Johann Cornies to Samuel Contentius, Oct. 17, 1828, in *Transformation on the Southern Ukrainian Steppe: Letters and Papers of Johann Cornies*, vol. 1, 1812–1835, trans. Ingrid I. Epp, ed. Harvey L. Dyck, Ingrid I. Epp, and John R. Staples (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 160.

4 Andrei M. Fadeev to Cornies, rec'd July 13, 1831, in *Transformation*, 1:227–35.

5 Major silk producers in Molotschna in 1853 included Isaak Enns (Altonau), Peter Rier (Altonau), Jacob Wiens (Altonau), Gerhard Enns (Altonau), and Jakob Neumann (Muensterberg). See S. Maslov, "Obozrenie shelkovodstva u khortitskikh i Molochanskikh kolonistov," *Zhurnal sel'skogo khoziaistva*, no. 3 (1853): 255–80.

6 Figures from various sources, including "O sostoianii raznykh otraslei sel'skogo khoziaistva v iuzhnoi Rossii, v 1849 godu," *Zhurnal ministerstva gosudarstvennykh imushchestv* 35, part 2 (1850): 220–22 (hereafter cited as ZhMGI); and Philipp Wiebe, "Ackerbauwirtschaft bei den Mennoniten im südlichen Russland," *Archiv für wissenschaftliche Kunde von Russland* 12 (1853): 429–36.

7 Philipp Wiebe, "Kurze praktische Anweisung zum Seidenbau," *Mittheilungen der Kaiserlichen freien ökonomischen Gesellschaft zu St. Petersburg* (1852): 231–33. On Wiebe's involvement with the committee, see P. M. Preobrazhenskii, *Istoricheskii obzor razvitiia shelkovodstva v Moskve i iugozapadnikh ot neia guberniakh deistvii komiteta shelkovodstva s 1847 goda apreliia 7 i po 7 apreliia 1872 goda* (Moscow: Universitetskoi Tip., 1872), [https://www.rusbibliophile.ru/Book/Preobrazhenskij\\_P\\_M\\_\\_Istoriche](https://www.rusbibliophile.ru/Book/Preobrazhenskij_P_M__Istoriche).

8 S. Maslov, "Obozrenie shelkovodstva u khortitskikh i Molochanskikh kolonistov"; and Alexander Petzholdt, *Reise im westlichen und südlichen europäischen Russland im Jahre 1855* (Gera: Griesbach, 1860), 167–68.

- 9 *Le propagateur de l'industrie de la soie en France* 5 (July 1842): 194–95.
- 10 Robinet, *Mémoire sur la filature de la soie* (Paris: Mme Huzard, 1839). On Krippner, see "Deiatel'nost' Moskovskogo komiteta shelkovodstva," *Trudy imperatorskogo vol'nogo ekonomicheskogo obshchestva* 3, no. 6 (1864): 454; his "improved" Robinet is illustrated in V. E. Iversen, *Kak dobyvat' shelk: Nastavlenie k razvedeniiu shelkovidnykh derev'ev i vyvodke shelkovidnykh kokonov* (St. Petersburg: Izdanie imperatorskogo ekonomicheskogo obshchestva, 1871), 85.
- 11 *Bulletin scientifique publié par l'Académie impériale des sciences de St.-Petersbourg* 9, no. 9/10 (1841): 134, 137; *Bulletin de la Classe physico-mathématique de l'Académie impériale des sciences de Saint-Petersbourg* 2, no. 19 (1844): 303; 3, no. 4 (1844): 61; and 3, no. 7 (1844): 110. Graf's machine and meetings in imperial Russia were widely reported in European journals. See, e.g., *Leipziger Allgemeine Zeitung*, Aug. 13, 1841, 11–12.
- 12 See the description under "Nuovo sistema per la filatura della seta, del signor Luigi Locatelli," *Dizionario Enciclopedico Tecnologico-Popolare*, comp. Gaetano Brey, vol. 4 (Milan: Giuseppe Chiusi, 1845), "Seta."
- 13 On its advantages, see "Metodo Locatelli per la filatura della seta," *La Dalmazia: Foglio letterario economico* 2, no. 4 (1846): 32.
- 14 Robinet, "Nouveau perfectionnement à la filature de la soie," *Journal d'agriculture pratique et de jardinage*, 2nd ser., 3 (July 1845–June 1846): 394–98.
- 15 Robert Haas, *Die Deutsche Seidenzucht: Anleitung zum Seidenbau; seine Geschichte, Statistik und Literatur* (Leipzig: I. I. Weber, 1852), 31–32; and D. N. Strukov, "Vzgliad na sostoianie raznykh otraslei sel'skogo khoziaistva v iuzhnoi Rossii v poslednie piat' let (1849–1854)," *ZhMGI* 56, no. 2 (1855): 1–22, cited in Vladimir Shaidurov, "Russian Germans in Russian Historiography from the Last Third of the 18th to the First Half of the 19th Century," *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences* 6, no. 6 (Dec. 2015): 155–56.
- 16 In *Transformation on the Southern Ukrainian Steppe: Letters and Papers of Johann Cornies*, vol. 2, 1836–1842, trans. Ingrid I. Epp, ed. Harvey L. Dyck, Ingrid I. Epp, and John R. Staples (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), 134, 418, 595. Unfortunately, the machine is not identified.
- 17 From 1815, Halbstadt already had a wool factory established by Johann Klassen that continued, with mixed success, to produce textiles into the 1850s.
- 18 Henry Schapansky, "Letter to the Editors re. Clockmaker Janzen," *Mennonite Historian* 34, no. 3 (Sept. 2008): 11.
- 19 Cornies may have been aware of von Türk's writings on the silk industry and those promoting educational reform.
- 20 Wilhelm von Türk, *Leben und Wirken des Regierungs- und Schulraths Wilhelm von Türk* (Potsdam: August Stein, 1859), 115–24. Mylius's name appears in one account referring to a Mennonite machine: J. H. Sonderegger, "Die Seidenhaspel des Mennoniten Gerhard Dyck," *Unterhaltungsblatt für deutsche Ansiedler im südlichen Russland* 5, no. 11 (1850): 83.
- 21 Wilhelm von Türk, "Ueber den Seidenbau, mit vorzüglicher Rücksicht auf die Provinz Brandenburg," *Verhandlungen des Vereins zur Beförderung des Gewerbflusses in Preussen* 13, no. (1834): 187.
- 22 Wilhelm von Türk, *Vollständige Anleitung zur zweckmäßigen Behandlung des Seidenbaues und des Haspelns der Seide sowie zur Erziehung und Behandlung der Maulbeerbäume, nach den neuesten Erfahrungen und Beobachtungen* (Leipzig: Gebrüder Reichenbach, 1835/1843).
- 23 Ibid.; S. S. Strukov, "O sostoianii sel'skogo khoziaistva v iuzhnoi Rossii v 1851 godu," *ZhMGI* 44, no. 2 (1852): 110; Zakharii P. Kniazheskii, "Shelkovodstvo i prepiatstviia, zaderzhivaiushchiia ego rasprostranenie," *Trudy imperatorskogo vol'nogo ekonomicheskogo obshchestva* 4 (1857): 48; "Vystavka sel'skikh proizvedenii v Ekaterinoslave v 1858 godu," *ZhMGI* 70, no. 1 (1859): 64; and Fedor Chizhov, *Pis'ma o Shelkovodstve* (Moscow: Tip. A. I. Mamontov, 1870), 179–80, 184–85.
- 24 Ivanov, "Usovershenstvovannaia shelkorazmotnaia mashina lansena," *Zemledel'cheskaia gazeta*, no. 17 (1863): 265–66.
- 25 "Ob uspekakh khoziaistva v koloniakh iuzhnogo kraia Rossii," *ZhMGI* 23, no. 2 (1847): 252–62; and "O sostoianii raznykh otraslei sel'skogo khoziaistva v iuzhnoi Rossii, v 1850 godu," *ZhMGI* 40, no. 2 (1851): 92–93.
- 26 Sonderegger, "Die Seidenhaspel des Mennoniten Gerhard Dyck."
- 27 "Vystavka sel'skikh proizvedenii v Ekaterinoslave v 1858 godu." Janzen, Lepp, and Dyck were awarded medals at the Exhibition of Rural Products in Ekaterinoslav.
- 28 Kniazheskii, "Shelkovodstvo i prepiatstviia, zaderzhivaiushchiia ego rasprostranenie," 52. Another account stated it cost 25 silver rubles, against 65 for Locatelli's machine. Chizhov, *Pis'ma o Shelkovodstve*, 180.
- 29 David H. Epp, *Sketches from the Pioneer Years of the Industry in the Mennonite Settlements of South Russia*, trans. Jacob P. Penner (Leamington, ON: pub. by translator, 1972), 13; and Carlo Poni, *La seta in Italia: Una grande industria prima della rivoluzione industriale* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2009).
- 30 Claudio Zanier, "La fabrication de la soie: Un domaine réservé aux femme," *Travail, genre et sociétés* 18, no. 2 (2007): 111–30.
- 31 For Italy see Patrizia Sione, "From Home to Factory: Women in the Nineteenth-Century Italian Silk Industry," in *European Women and Preindustrial Craft*, ed. Daryl M. Hafter (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 137–52. Similar changes occurred elsewhere.
- 32 "Ueber die Erfolge im Seidenbau in den deutschen Colonien des Taurischen Gouvernements," *Livländische Gouvernements-Zeitung*, Apr. 1, 1853, 8. On the seasonal nature of the work, see Friedrich Matthäi, *Die deutschen Ansiedlungen in Russland* (Leipzig: Hermann Fries, 1866), 265.
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- 40 On the building, see Adolf Bode, "Notizen gesammelt auf einer Forstreise durch einen Theil des Europäischen Russlands," *Beiträge zur Kenntniss des Russischen Reiches und der angrenzenden Länder Asiens* 19 (1854): 303. On the improved machine, see Kniazheskii, "Shelkovodstvo i prepiatstviia, zaderzhivaiushchiia ego rasprostranenie," 48.
- 41 "Kurze Übersicht des landwirtschaftlichen Zustandes im molotschner Mennonitenbezirke i. J. 1851," *Unterhaltungsblatt für deutsche Ansiedler im südlichen Russland* 7, no. 5 (May 1852): 51–58.
- 42 Details in "O sostoianii raznykh otraslei sel'skogo khoziaistva v iuzhnoi Rossii, v 1850 godu," 92–93.
- 43 See Preobrazhenskii, *Istoricheskii obzor razvitiia shelkovodstva*, 50–51.
- 44 Sheilaigh C. Ogilvie and Markus Cerman, "The Theories of Proto-industrialization," in *European Proto-industrialization*, ed. Sheilaigh C. Ogilvie and Markus Cerman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 1–11.
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- 46 For Chortitza, see Preobrazhenskii, *Istoricheskii obzor razvitiia shelkovodstva*, 200, 215. See also Maslov, "Obozrenie shelkovodstva u khortitskikh i Molochanskikh kolonistov," 265.
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- 50 Giovanni Federico, *An Economic History of the Silk Industry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 99–103, 194–95.
- 51 Shinya Sugiyama, *Japan's Industrialisation in the World Economy, 1859–1899: Export Trade and Overseas Competition* (London: Athlone, 1988), chap. 4.
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- 53 "Industrie de la soie dans les Provinces trauscausiennes et dans la Russie méridionale," in France, Ministère de l'agriculture, du commerce, et des travaux publics, *Annales du commerce extérieur: Russie, Faits commerciaux*, no. 18 (Apr. 1860), 28–29.
- 54 *Trudy vysochaishe utverzhdennogo s'ezda glavnykh po mashinostroitel'noi promyshlennosti deiatelei*, no. 2 (St. Petersburg: Pantelev, 1875), B.II.55–56.
- 55 Peter M. Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia (1789–1910)* (Fresno, CA: Board of Christian Literature, General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1978), 874, 881. The silk factory apparently was not a Mennonite venture.

# AN IMMIGRANT INDUSTRY IN AMERICA

Transfer, Development, and Demise

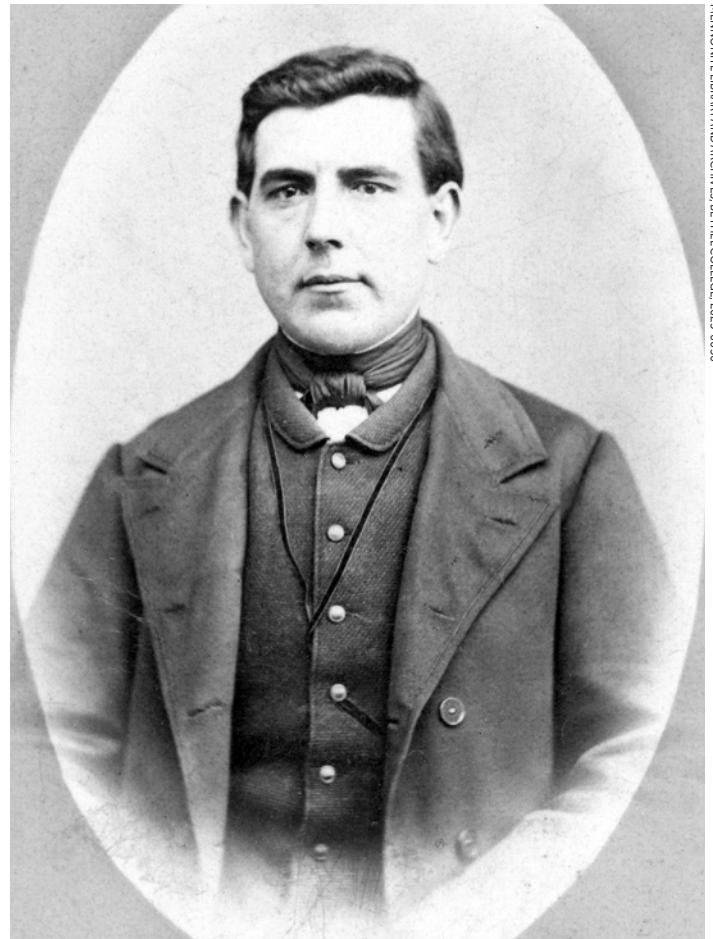
Rachel Pannabecker

Like all immigrants, Mennonites leaving imperial Russia in the 1870s and 1880s had to decide which material possessions to leave behind, and what to take with them to North America. Shipping a bulky silk reeling machine was not a likely choice, and would have been irrelevant to families that participated in the transition from domestic silk production to centralized reeling centres. Perhaps a finely carved gear or the cocoon-soaking basin were packed for their new homes. An easily portable option would have been mulberry seeds, brought with the hope of restarting a silk industry.<sup>1</sup> Unquestionably, knowledge of sericulture and experience in reeling silk were transferable and thus offered a clear route to economic security.

## SILK REELING IN A NEW LAND

Abraham Thiessen, an activist for land reform in imperial Russia, immigrated to the Kleine Gemeinde community that had settled around Jansen, Nebraska, in 1876 or 1877.<sup>2</sup> Thiessen, a vocal promoter of sericulture, imported Russian mulberry seed which he sold along with seedling trees and silkworm eggs.<sup>3</sup> At the 1881 Nebraska State Fair, he received a monetary prize for “the first silk reeled in Nebraska and spun from the silk worms bred there.”<sup>4</sup> Thiessen’s silk reeling machine was built by Mr. Bose (Abraham Boese?) of York County, Nebraska.<sup>5</sup> In 1884, Thiessen published a booklet in English on silk culture, in which he printed an illustration of a silk reeling machine being operated by women.<sup>6</sup> Later that year, he sent a silk reel as well as samples of cocoons and silkworm eggs to the World’s Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition in New Orleans, for the Nebraska exhibit.<sup>7</sup>

The opportunity to exhibit at this world’s fair attracted other Mennonite immigrants. The “Russian colony” at Mountain Lake, Minnesota, sent two large cases with five bushels of cocoons to show the processes of silk culture and manufacture, including a handkerchief made from raw silk.<sup>8</sup> Abraham Penner, a Mountain Lake immigrant involved in multiple commercial enterprises,



Abraham Thiessen, who immigrated to the Kleine Gemeinde community in Jansen, Nebraska, was a vocal promoter of sericulture and imported Russian mulberry seed.

likely initiated the project, as he had previously worked with an agent to send skeins of raw silk to eastern manufacturers to determine their market value.<sup>9</sup> The first known silk reeling among Kansas Mennonites was in 1881, when German-language



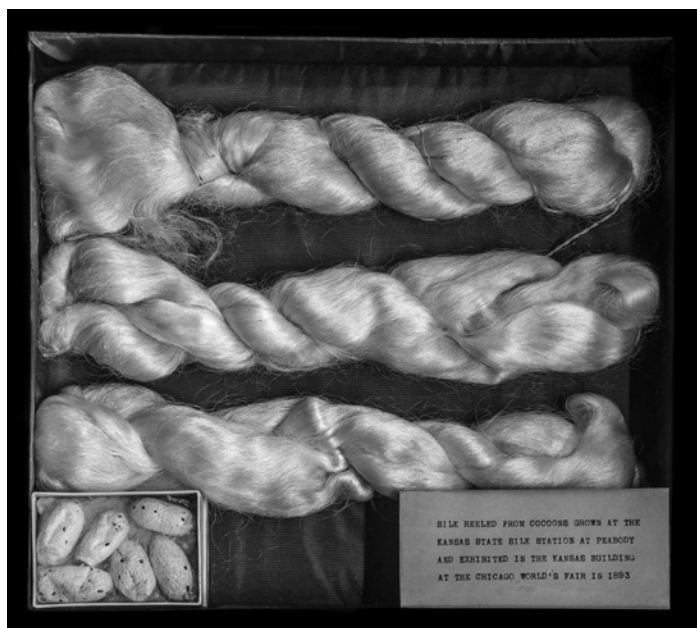
Silk reeling in Mennonite communities in imperial Russia often involved female labour. ABRAHAM THIESSEN, *THE MULBERRY TREES AND SILK CULTURE* (1884), 24

newspapers reported that “Brother Krause in New Alexanderwohl put the first silk reel into operation in Kansas and delivered a sample of reeled silk, which was sent to silk manufacturers in the East.”<sup>10</sup> The following year, a journalist watched the wife of Johann Krause producing raw silk on “a rude twister and reel of home construction.”<sup>11</sup>

#### TOWARDS FACTORY-BASED REELING

The examples of Thiessen, Penner, and Krause, and their deliberate efforts to connect to a wider public and East Coast manufacturers, fit the definition of proto-industrialization: artisanal production of goods in a rural, domestic setting that are destined for an external market. Such pre-factory manufacturing

was often a sideline to agriculture. Mennonite immigrants to the Great Plains, having experienced in imperial Russia the centralization of yarn reeling by skilled operators and overseers to produce raw silk for Moscow manufacturers, were primed to respond to growing interest in developing an American silk industry. The goal of this effort was to replace imported raw silk, the basic material urgently needed by the mechanized throwing (thread-manufacture) and weaving mills based in the mid-Atlantic states.



Raw silk twists reeled by Sarah Conrad (Konrath) and displayed at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago.

The United States Department of Agriculture clearly articulated the economic rationale for a silk industry: an unfavourable imbalance of trade, national debt due to foreign imports, and a perceived need for industrial independence through the creation of a home market.<sup>12</sup> Simultaneously with Mennonite immigrants reeling silk, the US Congress appropriated \$15,000 in 1884 for the establishment of a Silk Division within USDA's Bureau of Entomology.<sup>13</sup> The Silk Division was given the mandate to distribute sericulture literature, silkworm eggs, and mulberry trees to the American public, as well as to buy cocoons and raw silk to establish a profitable reeling industry.<sup>14</sup>

This federal initiative was championed by the Women's Silk Culture Association in Philadelphia, the state of California, and private investors, particularly in the southern states, all of whom had been experimenting with small-scale silk filatures, or reeling centres. Citizens in Kansas actively promoted a silk industry, and a report to the Kansas Board of Agriculture acknowledged the valuable experience of Mennonites from imperial Russia: "The reeling was done wholly by experts, who were required to obtain a license from the Government. A number of these persons, who were licensed reelers in Europe, have settled here and will reel the cocoons raised here, when the industry is further advanced."<sup>15</sup>

Isaiah Horner, a vigorous advocate of sericulture from Emporia, Kansas, travelled throughout the state lecturing on

sericulture with specimens of raw silk reeled by Helen Kroeker, a Mennonite woman from Hillsboro.<sup>16</sup> Mennonite immigrants had dealt with tsarist officials in imperial Russia, and used that experience to advocate for the establishment of a state silk station. In March 1887, seventy "Russians" from Hillsboro signed a petition supporting J. H. Morse of Peabody as one of three appointments to the Kansas Silk Commission.<sup>17</sup> This public display of interest proved to be significant when the Kansas governor selected Morse for the Silk Commission, which was followed by its selection of Horner as the first station superintendent and the town of Peabody for the silk station – within twenty miles of Mennonite settlements around Hillsboro, Newton, and Goessel. The Kansas legislature appropriated \$13,000 to launch the Kansas Silk Station, with a building that would house a cocoonery on the upper floor, a filature with reeling machines on the ground floor, a basement for storing mulberry leaves and cocoons, and a flat roof for drying cocoons.<sup>18</sup> From the first days of raising silkworms in March 1887 through its years of active operation, the station employed immigrant Mennonites from the Hillsboro community.

#### MENNONITE MEN AND THE BUSINESS OF MACHINES

In its first year the Kansas State Silk Station expended \$2,461.27 for "machinery and fixtures."<sup>19</sup> A local newspaper reported that the first reeling machine at the station went into operation on May 5, 1887, and was "worked by foot power, such as the Mennonites use."<sup>20</sup> While the interior of the building took longer to be furnished, by late July three silk reelers were at work on machines treadled by foot, but with the expectation of soon activating reeling by steam power that would also supply hot water for the soaking basin.<sup>21</sup>

These machines were built by Bernhard Jansen, who was one of the petition signatories.<sup>22</sup> Jansen had learned clockmaking in imperial Russia from his father, Abraham Janzen, whose silk reel inventions had been important to the Mennonite silk industry. In 1879, Bernhard immigrated to Hillsboro, where he was described as a watchmaker and an "experienced sericulturist."<sup>23</sup> One local report claimed that Bernhard had been awarded a silver medal by the tsarist state at an international exhibition for his expertise in silk reeling and the invention of a patented silk reel, "the original design being still in Mr. Jansen's possession."<sup>24</sup> While the journalist could have confused father and son regarding the award and invention, Bernhard was undoubtedly knowledgeable about silk reeling machines used by Mennonites in imperial Russia, from his father's upright models meant for domestic reeling to improved machines for factory production.

Apparently the "very visionary" Horner ignored Jansen's knowledge and experience: "Machinery, reels, etc., were changed time and again. It was a veritable 'cut-and-try' period."<sup>25</sup> In June of its first season, the station employed Abraham Thiessen, and by September the Silk Commission discharged Horner for mismanagement and insubordination, immediately appointing Thiessen as superintendent. Thiessen recruited Henry Neufeld,

a Marion County farmer who had thirty-two years of silk reeling experience in imperial Russia.<sup>26</sup> Despite the commissioners' enthusiasm for Thiessen's experience, he resigned over a wage dispute in June 1888 and returned to Nebraska, where he passed away on May 7, 1889. Jansen followed Thiessen as superintendent until the beginning of the 1889 season, when Silk Commissioner L. A. Buck declared the need for retrenchment, assuming station management for himself and cancelling the superintendent and assistant superintendent positions.<sup>27</sup>

Despite the significant Mennonite contribution to building and maintaining the silk station's reeling machines, Buck pursued inventions that he expected could make the station profitable. Reports by Buck and Philip Walker of the USDA consistently expressed their belief in the critical need for improved reeling machinery, and their particular admiration for Edward W. Serrell Jr.'s invention of an automatic stop mechanism that engaged when thin or broken filaments lessened the tension. Following visits to filatures in Philadelphia and Washington, DC, in 1889, Buck divulged that he was "disappointed, as they informed me that this reel was not a complete success."<sup>28</sup> Despite proponents firmly advocating that inventions could make the American silk industry self-sustaining, the US Congress cut appropriations for the Silk Division, which closed on June 30, 1891.<sup>29</sup>

The Kansas Silk Station persisted based on the praise received for the quality of its reeled silk from Belding Brothers, a thread manufacturer that was the main purchaser of Peabody raw silk. However, Buck admitted that the station needed a "more rapid and cheaper process of reeling the silk from the cocoons."<sup>30</sup> Without machine improvements to decrease labour costs or increase productivity, the Kansas legislature reduced its 1895 appropriation to a mere \$100 to dispose of the station's assets, which was completed in 1897.<sup>31</sup>

#### MENNONITE WOMEN AND THE ART OF REELING

To secure workers for the new Kansas Silk Station, Superintendent Horner contributed articles to area newspapers, including *Die Mennonitische Rundschau* where he recruited Mennonite girls to learn "the art of silk reeling" for "good wages."<sup>32</sup> A local newspaper noted that Helen Kroeker was supervising the station while Horner travelled east to "investigate improved machinery."<sup>33</sup> In the following months, Kroeker was lauded in the press as "an expert in all silk-worm matters," reeling silk that was "strictly first-class in quality," and "fully competent" to take charge of the reeling department after Horner was discharged.<sup>34</sup>

When Thiessen took over as superintendent, he revealed, "The best silk at the station has been reeled by Mrs. Sudermann, who passed an examination in Russia as a first-class reeler," followed by Helen Kroeker and Katharine Stelting, who lacked similar credentials.<sup>35</sup> Mrs. "Sudeman" became the educator in charge of the reelers in the 1888 season.<sup>36</sup> Station expense accounts indicate that E. Suderman was again in charge in 1891, while Kroeker assumed that position in 1889 and the early part of the 1890 season, with Sarah Conrad (Konrath) fulfilling that role

in the late 1890 and 1891 seasons. These ledgers also show that Stelting reeled again in 1889 along with Louisa Nickel and H. Reimer.<sup>37</sup> The last remaining Mennonite reeler at the station was Conrad, whose raw silk was "very tastefully staged" in the Kansas exhibit at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago.<sup>38</sup>

Reeling in the nineteenth century was a complex interaction between humans, cocoons, and machines. In 1871, the USDA claimed that "with four days of instruction and three weeks of practice a woman or girl can become expert in the art of reeling silk."<sup>39</sup> Yet Thiessen's 1884 manual firmly stated, "We advise all, not acquainted with the art of reeling or provided with the proper machines, not to attempt to reel . . ."<sup>40</sup> Many sericulture manuals described reeling along with information on mulberry trees and silkworms. For a top-quality skein of raw silk, the women reeling cocoons at the Kansas Silk Station managed the following tasks:<sup>41</sup>

(1) Sorting: selecting cocoons for size, colour, and overall quality, setting aside those that are too small, damaged, stained, or pierced by the moth (up to 10 per cent of cocoons are unsuitable). If not reeling immediately, the pupa must be "stifled" by heating or steaming.

(2) Floss removal: brushing away the cocoon's coarse, irregular, and dusty outer filaments. Floss becomes waste silk along with pierced cocoons, broken filaments, and the weak, innermost cocoon filaments, and is cut and spun like cotton or wool fibres.

(3) Cooking/degumming: submerging the cocoons in hot water to soften sericin (the gum-like protein binding filaments forming the cocoon). Temperature and soaking time vary (variety of silkworm, where raised, whether stifled) to remove just enough sericin to avoid filaments sticking together (complete degumming occurs during thread manufacture). This step includes igniting the heat source and keeping the basin clean of floss, pupae, and debris that would dull silk's natural gloss.

(4) Reel set-up: brushing to locate the filament end of four to six cocoons (ten in imperial Russia), to achieve the desired strand diameter and strength, manually inserting the strand into guides to wring out excess water and to spread out the strand, then fastening it onto the reel.

(5) Reeling: engaging the treadle or the steam-powered fly-wheel to turn the reel and unwind the prepared ends, monitoring the filaments for uniformity, and maintaining a continuous pace to avoid stress on the filaments – a procedure that did not accommodate worker breaks.

(6) Nourishing/lancing: stopping the reel when filaments are broken or knotty, or when reaching the innermost filaments that are thin and weak, for replacement with another prepared cocoon end. Timing varies as cocoon filaments range from half a kilometre to one kilometre in length.

(7) Drying: removing the reel from the frame to allow unwound silk to air dry for six to eight hours before detaching the skeins from the reel.

(8) Disbanding: removing filaments from the reel and forming each group into a merchandisable skein of raw silk.

Although deflossing or keeping the water basin clear could be delegated to an assistant, the reeler was responsible for simul-

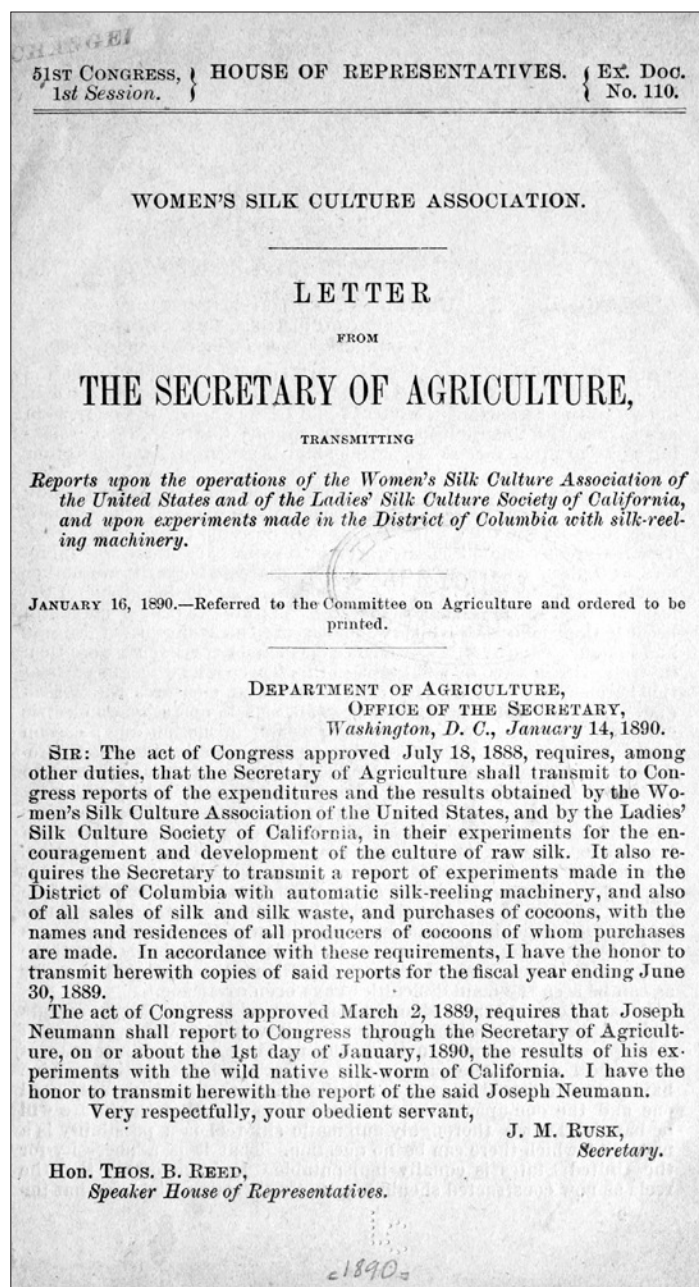
taneously keeping all operations and their precise adjustments in unceasing motion for multiple skeins.<sup>42</sup> The art of reeling required “skill, tact, experience, patience and watchfulness, and . . . ingenuity.”<sup>43</sup> Nourishing required fine motor skills and “accuracy of the human eye and delicacy of the human touch.”<sup>44</sup> Decades later it was acknowledged that “the perfection of the filature is still left with the girl’s ability.”<sup>45</sup> The journalist who had watched Mrs. Krause reel acknowledged that “the work required infinite patience, of which few Americans are possessed.”<sup>46</sup>

## THE DEMISE OF AN IMMIGRANT INDUSTRY

When Isaiah Horner lobbied the Kansas legislature in February 1887 for a state-funded silk station, he announced, “This is the golden opportunity for Kansas to become the silk center of the New World.”<sup>47</sup> Yet the Kansas Silk Station never acquired more than ten reeling machines, when its steam power system could accommodate thirty to fifty.<sup>48</sup> The station never raised or purchased enough cocoons to keep the reelers working beyond September.<sup>49</sup> Thus the station never fulfilled its aspiration to become the only silk factory between San Francisco and Washington, DC. Despite immigrant Mennonites offering reeling machine experience and skills to this infant industry, their contributions could not manufacture raw silk that was competitive with less expensive imports reeled by low-wage workers in China and Japan.

The USDA regularly acknowledged the need for tariffs and financial incentives to protect the emerging silk industry, and called on Congress to rectify the imbalance of raw silk being imported freely while heavy duties shielded woven silk goods.<sup>50</sup> The Kansas State Silk Station likewise declared the need for protective tariffs and “bounties.”<sup>51</sup> Mennonites were not unaware of the economic barriers to the development of a factory-based cocoonery and filature. In his 1884 pamphlet, Abraham Thiessen expressed his hopeful expectations and his concern about the financial viability of a Mennonite silk industry: “Here in America, as far as my three years’ experience goes, and that of my compatriots in Minnesota and Kansas, there seems to be no reason why silk culture should not succeed. . . . If our wisecracks in Washington would furthermore support us with a good protective tariff on raw silk, silk culture would increase largely.”<sup>52</sup> In contrast, there were always those who adhered to a free trade philosophy and opposed this use of taxpayer money. As one newspaper put it in 1890, “The Kansas silk station is a humbug and a fraud” (“Die Kansas Seidenstation ist ein Humbug und ein Schwindel”).<sup>53</sup>

Mennonite enthusiasm for a silk industry that absorbed its sons’ inventiveness and boarded its unmarried daughters away from home was countered by several economic and social factors. Like in imperial Russia, first-generation immigrants found that the cultivation of wheat as a commodity crop using modern machines was a more profitable economic investment, especially when the June winter wheat harvest competed for a family’s time and labour. Concurrently, Kansas Mennonite education offered new opportunities for women in teaching and mission work. After an initial debate about whether to accept female students,



The US Congress supported establishing a Silk Section within USDA’s Department of Entomology, an initiative championed by the Women’s Silk Culture Association.

the Halstead Seminary (1883–1893) enrolled ten girls during its first year; Bethel College opened in 1893 with twenty-one women out of ninety-eight students.<sup>54</sup> The Kansas experiment in rural industrialization was short-lived without a dynamic advocate like Thiessen, who passed away in 1889 at age fifty. Regardless, the story of Mennonites building and operating silk reeling machines demonstrates that in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Mennonite men and women were integrated into national and global markets and active participants in the effort to move the proto-industrial system of silk reeling to a factory-based industry.

Rachel Pannabecker is the retired director of Kauffman Museum at Bethel College, North Newton, Kansas.

- 1 C. Henry Smith, *The Coming of the Russian Mennonites* (Berne, IN: Mennonite Book Concern, 1927), 207. Latitudes north of Cottonwood County, Minnesota, were considered too cold for raising mulberry trees. Charles Gibb, "Ornamental and Timber Trees (Not Natives of the Province of Quebec)," in *Seventh Report of the Montreal Horticultural Society and Fruit Growers' Association of the Province of Quebec, for the Year 1881* (Montreal: The Society, 1882), 87–90. See also Tracy Ruta Fuchs, *Beauty and Sustenance: A History of Mennonite Gardens and Orchards in Russia and Manitoba* (Steinbach, MB: Mennonite Heritage Village, 2007), 19; and Susan Jane Fisher, "Seeds from the Steppe: Mennonites, Horticulture, and the Construction of Landscapes on Manitoba's West Reserve, 1870–1950" (PhD diss., University of Manitoba, 2017), 128.
- 2 Henry Fast, "The Kleine Gemeinde in the United States of America," in *Profile of the Mennonite Kleine Gemeinde, 1874* (Steinbach, MB: DFP Publications, 1987), 89, 98, 113, 164; Abraham F. Thiessen (1832–89), *Preservings*, no. 12 (June 1998): 13; and Cornelius Krahn, "Abraham Thiessen: A Mennonite Revolutionary?," *Mennonite Life* 25, no. 2 (April 1969): 73–77. The exact date of Thiessen's immigration is unknown, but would have followed his 1876 flight to Switzerland. Richard D. Thiessen, "Thiessen, Abraham (1838–1889)," in *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, last modified Jan. 16, 2017.
- 3 C. V. Riley, "Report of the Entomologist," in *Report of the Commissioner of Agriculture for the Years 1881 and 1882* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1882), 73.
- 4 *Daily Nebraska State Journal* (Lincoln, NE), Sept. 15, 1881, 3; and *Die Mennonitische Rundschau*, Feb. 5, 1882, 3.
- 5 Fast, "Kleine Gemeinde," 113.
- 6 Abraham Thiessen, *The Mulberry Trees and Silk Culture* (Lincoln, NE: State Journal Co., 1884), 24.
- 7 "Nebraska's Silk Industries," *Omaha (NE) Daily Bee*, Dec. 13, 1884, 8.
- 8 *Winona (MN) Daily Republican*, Sept. 9, 1885, 2; and "Report of Hon. Oliver Gibbs, Jr., Commissioner of Minnesota, to the World's Exposition at New Orleans, 1884–5, on the Exhibit Made by This State," in *Executive Documents of the State of Minnesota for the Year 1886*, vol. 5 (St. Paul: Pioneer Press, 1887), 75.
- 9 Ferdinand P. Schultz, *A History of the Settlement of German Mennonites from Russia, at Mountain Lake, Minnesota* (Minneapolis: pub. by author, 1938), 68, 110; "Silk Raising in Minnesota," *Tribune* (Minneapolis, MN), Mar. 7, 1882, 4; and "Silk in Minnesota," *Daily Globe* (Saint Paul, MN), May 2, 1882, 2.
- 10 "Der erste Seiden-Haspel in Kansas," *Zur Heimath*, Nov. 7, 1881, 164; noted in *Die Mennonitische Rundschau*, Nov. 15, 1881, 3.
- 11 Noble L. Prentiss, "A Day with the Mennonites," *Atchison (KS) Champion*, May 4, 1882, 2; reprinted in "As Others Saw Them," *Mennonite Life* 25, no. 2 (Apr. 1970): 61.
- 12 Lewis Bollman, "Silk Cultivation," in *Report of the Commissioner of Agriculture for the Year 1872* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1874), 304–5.
- 13 L. O. Howard, "The United States Department of Agriculture and Silk Culture," in *Yearbook of the United States Department of Agriculture, 1903* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1904), 141.
- 14 C. V. Riley, "Report of the Entomologist," in *Report of the Commissioner of Agriculture for the Year 1884* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1884), 286, 359.
- 15 E. L. Meyer, "Silk Culture in Kansas," in *Quarterly Report of the Kansas State Board of Agriculture for the Quarter Ending December 31, 1883* (Topeka: Kansas State Publishing House, 1884), 84.
- 16 "Silk Culture," *Garden City (KS) Sentinel*, Aug. 11, 1886, 3; and *Hillsboro (KS) Herald*, June 21, 1888, 3.
- 17 "Petition of Peter Loewen, Cornelius Krause and Sixty-eight Other Russians," Mar. 3, 1887, box 9, folder 8, Records of the Kansas Governor's Office, Administration of Governor John Alexander Martin (1885–1889), State Archives, Kansas Historical Society, Topeka. At least three German-speaking non-Mennonites signed the petition, which was handwritten in German with a typed English translation. Loewen and Krause were the first two signatures on the English page. Names represent men from Mennonite Brethren, Krimmer Mennonite Brethren, and General Conference Mennonite churches. Hundreds of area men signed similar petitions in English.
- 18 "The Silk Station," *Weekly Commonwealth* (Topeka, KS), Feb. 2, 1888, 6; and Mrs. S. H. Bennett, "History of Marion County Silk Industry Makes an Interesting Early-Day Story," *Marion (KS) Record-Review*, Sept. 8, 1949, in "Silk Culture Clippings," 129, Kansas Historical Society.
- 19 *First Biennial Report of the Board of Silk Commissioners of the State of Kansas, 1887–88* (Topeka: Kansas Publishing House, 1888), 6.
- 20 *Peabody (KS) Gazette*, May 5, 1887, 4, 1.
- 21 John F. Harms, "Die Seidenstation in Peabody," *Marion County (KS) Anzeiger*, July 22, 1887, 1.
- 22 *First Biennial Report of the Board of Silk Commissioners*, 4.
- 23 *Hillsboro Herald*, June 14, 1888, 3.
- 24 *Peabody Gazette*, June 23, 1888, 2. The whereabouts of the medal and design are unknown.
- 25 *First Biennial Report of the Board of Silk Commissioners*, 4. For more on the station's management problems, see R. Alton Lee, "The Ill-Fated Kansas Silk Industry," *Kansas History* 23, no. 4 (Winter 2000/2001): 240–55.
- 26 "A Valuable Man," *Peabody Gazette*, Nov. 3, 1887, 5.
- 27 L. A. Buck, *Second Biennial Report of the Silk Commissioner of the State of Kansas, 1889–90* (Topeka: Kansas Publishing House, 1891), 4.
- 28 L. A. Buck, "Report of State Silk Commissioner," in *Report of the Kansas State Board of Agriculture for the Quarter Ending December 31, 1889* (Topeka: Kansas State Publishing House, 1890), 106.
- 29 Howard, "United States Department of Agriculture and Silk Culture," 143.
- 30 L. A. Buck, *Annual Report of the Silk Commissioner of the State of Kansas, Year Ending June 30, 1892* (Topeka: Hamilton Printing Company, 1893), 3.
- 31 Lee, "Ill-Fated Kansas Silk Industry," 255; and W. C. Webb (comp.), *General Statutes of the State of Kansas, 1897*, vol. 1 (Topeka: W. C. Webb, 1897), 214–15.
- 32 *Die Mennonitische Rundschau*, May 11, 1887, 1.
- 33 *Peabody Gazette*, Apr. 21, 1887, 4.
- 34 "The Kansas Experimental Silk Station," *Wichita (KS) Eagle*, Apr. 24, 1887, 2; *Marion (KS) Register*, Aug. 24, 1887, 3; and J. H. Morse, "The Horner Trouble," *Topeka (KS) Daily Capital*, Oct. 8, 1887, 4.
- 35 A. Thiessen, "Our Silk Station," *Peabody (KS) Graphic*, Dec. 2, 1887, 1. Sudermann, Kroeker, and Stelling were likely the three reelers seen at work in July in Harms, "Die Seidenstation in Peabody," 1.
- 36 *First Biennial Report of the Board of Silk Commissioners*, 4.
- 37 L. A. Buck, "Report of the Kansas State Silk Commissioner from April 23, 1889 to January 1, 1891" and "Report of the Kansas State Silk Commissioner from January 1, 1891 to January 1, 1892," Silk Commissioners, State Board of, 1889–1892, box 2, folder 27, Records of the Kansas Governor's Office, Administration of Governor Lyman Underwood Humphrey 1889–1893, State Archives, Kansas Historical Society. No men are listed as reelers in the 1889–91 expense accounts. Women reelers with non-Mennonite names in the two ledgers were Blanch Beaver, Minnie Beaver, L. Ferguson, Lizzie Gibb, Alice Grayson, Ella Holler, Grace Holler, C. Johnson, K. Johnson, Alice Probst, Louise/Lulu Probst, Amelia Smith, H. Stealy, A. Sterkel, and Emily Sterkel.
- 38 "Kansas bietet die ganze Welt," *Hillsboro (KS) Anzeiger*, Aug. 18, 1893, 3; reprinted in *Die Mennonitische Rundschau*, Aug. 23, 1893, 1.
- 39 "Silk Culture," in *Report of the Commissioner of Agriculture for the Year 1870* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1871), 238.
- 40 Thiessen, *Mulberry Trees*, 25.
- 41 Compiled principally from: George Richardson Porter, *A Treatise on the Origin, Progressive Improvement, and Present State, of the Silk Manufacture* (London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown & Green, 1831), 182–95; translated as *Das Ganze der Seiden-Manufactur* (Quedlinburg: Gottfr. Basse, 1835); C. V. Riley, *The Silkworm; Being a Brief Manual of Instructions for the Production of Silk* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1879); *An Instruction Book in the Art of Silk Culture* (Philadelphia: Women's Silk Culture Association, 1882); and Thiessen, *Mulberry Trees*, 23.
- 42 Reeling machines would stand idle while reelers spent about one-fourth of their time preparing cocoons. Delegating less skilled operations to lower wage labour was part of the "Serrell system," an irony given the failure of Serrell's mechanical patents to speed up the reeling process. C. V. Riley, "Report of the Entomologist," in *Report of the Commissioner of Agriculture, 1885* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1885), 218–19.
- 43 L. P. Brockett, *The Silk Industry in America* (New York: Silk Association of America, 1876), 87.
- 44 C. V. Riley, *The Mulberry Silkworm; Being a Manual of Instructions in Silk-Culture*, 6th ed. (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1886), 50.
- 45 Leo Duran, *Raw Silk: A Practical Hand-Book for the Buyer* (New York: Silk Publishing Company, 1921), 39–40.
- 46 Prentiss, "Day with the Mennonites," 2.
- 47 "Silk Culture in Kansas," *Marion (KS) Record*, Feb. 25, 1887, 2.
- 48 "Silk Station," *Weekly Commonwealth*, 6; and Buck, *Second Biennial Report*, 5.
- 49 Buck, "Report . . . April 23, 1889 to January 1, 1891"; and Buck, "Report . . . January 1, 1891 to January 1, 1892."
- 50 Riley, "Report of the Entomologist," 1882, 75; C. V. Riley, "Report of the Entomologist," in *Report of the Commissioner of Agriculture for the Year 1883* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1883), 101; C. V. Riley, "Report of the Entomologist," in *Report of the Commissioner of Agriculture, 1888* (Washington, Government Printing Office, 1889), 54–55; and Philip Walker, "Report of the Chief of the Silk Section," in *Report of the Commissioner of Agriculture, 1890* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1890), 266.
- 51 *First Biennial Report of the Board of Silk Commissioners*, 5. Today a bounty would be called a subsidy.
- 52 Thiessen, *Mulberry Trees*, 8–9. He was also aware of the irony that Europeans "procure fresh eggs annually from Japan, which pass Omaha, Neb., generally in the latter part of February on their way east" (9–10), an Asia-to-London trip that was facilitated by the US transcontinental railroad.
- 53 *McPherson (KS) Daily Republican*, Feb. 22, 1890, 2; translation in *Marion County Anzeiger*, Feb. 28, 1890, 3.
- 54 Peter J. Wedel, *The Story of Bethel College* (North Newton, KS: Bethel College, 1954), 35, 95.

# SHOWCASING THE EMPIRE

## Mennonites and International Exhibitions

Nataliya Venger

During the nineteenth century, European empires developed a tradition of hosting large exhibitions to showcase technological innovation and developments in agricultural practices.<sup>1</sup> In the Russian empire, Mennonites participated in regional and international exhibitions, where their contributions highlighted their achievements, which were recognized by the experts of the day. By the early 1900s, Mennonite factories and mills celebrated their industrial success by proudly displaying their awards on letterheads, posters, and in factory catalogues.<sup>2</sup> Yet despite these visible displays of achievement, the early history of Mennonite participation in exhibitions remains largely unknown.<sup>3</sup>

The mid-nineteenth century was a time of dramatic change for Europe. Rapid capitalist development, the growth of inter-

national markets, significant scientific discoveries and inventions, and technological progress spurred on industrialization in many countries. Changes also occurred in the sphere of everyday rural life through improvements to agricultural practices and technology. For imperial Russia, this was a time of trying to “catch up” to European powers, and the state took a systematic approach to agricultural improvement and education. Ongoing debates about the abolition of serfdom, reforms for state peasants, and the improvement of farming methods shaped this approach. The Ministry of State Domains, which was responsible for the care and supervision of state peasants and foreign colonists (which included Mennonites), regarded exhibitions as part of a broader program of modernization. This program included establishing

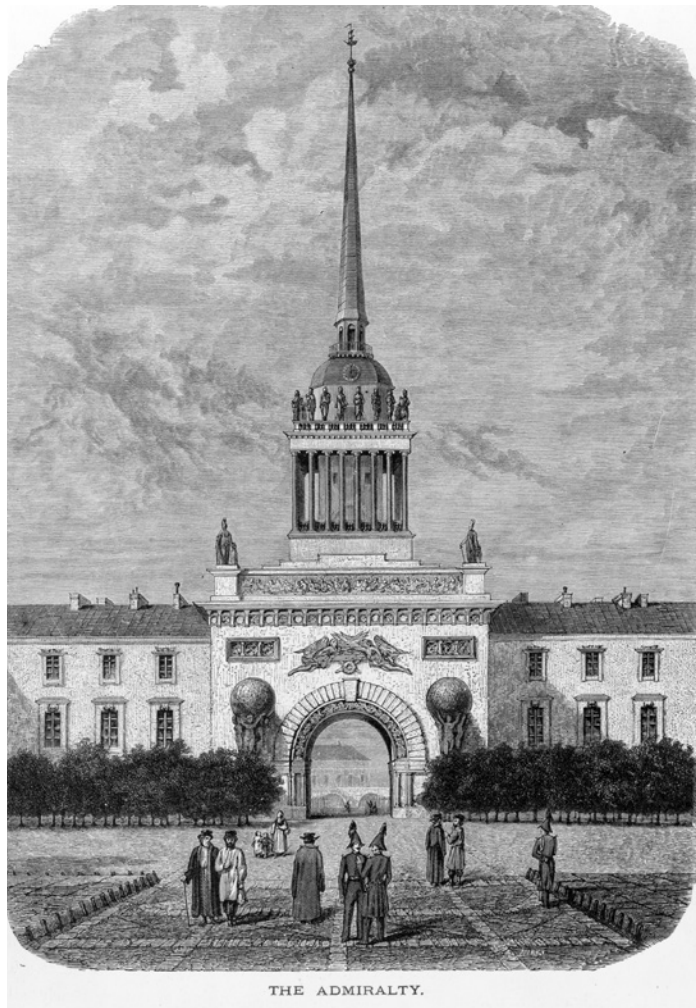


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In October 1845, Mennonite producers took part in the First Agricultural Exhibition of Tavrida province, held in the city of Odessa.

educational centres, model farms, and other projects in which Mennonites participated.<sup>4</sup>

In 1828, the imperial Russian state decided to organize regular industrial exhibitions to showcase advancements in industry, trade, and agriculture. The following year, the first All-Russian Industrial Exhibition was held in St. Petersburg. In 1837, the



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In 1860, Mennonites from the Molotschna colony participated in the St. Petersburg Exhibition of Agriculture and Industry, held in the imperial capital.

Ministry of Internal Affairs distributed a plan to provincial governors for organizing exhibitions in connection with an extensive tour of the empire, including the Molotschna colony, by the heir to the throne, Crown Prince Alexander.<sup>5</sup> These exhibitions, featuring industrial and agricultural products, were to familiarize the Crown Prince with the economic activities of the regions and to stimulate local industry and trade. This plan became a model for future events.<sup>6</sup>

In 1848, an imperial decree “On Exhibitions of Manufactured, Factory, and Agricultural Products” outlined the main criteria for evaluating exhibits. In 1850, the Ministry of State Domains approved a set of rules for provincial exhibitions of agricultural products.<sup>7</sup> This series of official regulatory acts formalized and guided the development of exhibition practices in the Russian empire, resulting in the establishment of an extensive network

of provincial and regional exhibitions. At the initiative of the Ministry of State Domains, state peasants, local landowners, nobility, and colonists, including Mennonites, participated in these events.<sup>8</sup>

Mennonites considered their participation in these exhibitions as a chance to showcase their achievements, share farming methods, and demonstrate the effectiveness of their agricultural practices. Producers who won an award benefited from the prestige and the cash prize.

### FIRST AGRICULTURAL EXHIBITION OF TAVRIDA PROVINCE

In October 1845, Mennonite producers took part in the First Agricultural Exhibition of Tavrida Province, held in the city of Odessa (Odesa). This was their first experience participating in an exhibition. As a corresponding member of the Imperial Free Economic Society, Johann Cornies was on the exhibition’s organizing committee. His colleagues on the committee included the governor of Tavrida province, V. I. Pestel,<sup>9</sup> and state councillor Christian von Steven, an agriculture expert.<sup>10</sup> The exhibition featured 1,652 items, some of which were purchased by visitors. According to the catalogue, only 4 out of 343 participants in the exhibition were Mennonites.<sup>11</sup>

The exhibition catalogue presented a silk-spinning machine by the Mennonite Abraham Janzen, a device unique at the time. State councillor Steven insisted on testing the machine publicly. It proved to be practical, “convenient and easy to use.”<sup>12</sup> A local Ukrainian nobleman, I. G. Khristovskiy, purchased the machine “for his peasant women engaged in silk production, as he was satisfied with the samples of silk presented by the Mennonites.” Janzen received a cash prize of 25 rubles for the machine – a substantial amount.<sup>13</sup>

In the tobacco section, the Albanian, Syrian, and Shiraz varieties presented by Johann Cornies were judged to be the best products (among thirteen entries) in the province.<sup>14</sup> The cheese produced by Cornies was also recognized for its premium quality. Based on these results, Johann Cornies was awarded a Certificate of Merit.<sup>15</sup> A flat roof tile manufactured in the Mennonite colonies was also recognized as the best in its category.<sup>16</sup>

### ST. PETERSBURG EXHIBITION

In September 1860, Mennonites from the southern Ukrainian lands participated in the St. Petersburg Exhibition of Agriculture and Industry. Surviving sources document their interest in participating in the exhibition and their desire to present their colonies in a dignified manner. According to a letter addressed to Philipp Wiebe from the director of the Imperial Free Economic Society, the Mennonites won several awards: one small gold medal, one large silver medal, one small silver medal, two large bronze medals, and five diplomas.<sup>17</sup>

What was sent to the imperial capital? At the top of the list were drawings – plans of Mennonite model farms. Herman Jantzen, a teacher from Orloff (Molotschna colony), depicted the layout of a typical Mennonite farmstead with all its key features.<sup>18</sup>

The Ministry of State Domains associated the success of the Mennonite communities primarily with their rational approach to organizing agricultural production – the structure of their farms, the distribution of land, and the size of landholdings. On the eve of the adoption of the tsar's manifesto abolishing serfdom in 1861, as debates over the reform neared their conclusion, it

were supplemented with explanations and descriptions.<sup>22</sup>

Mennonite craftsmen also garnered attention. Jakob Esau, the blacksmith from Juschanlee village, submitted a currycomb. The catalogue reported that the small horse-grooming tool had been “invented by [Esau] and used with particular benefit in all private and state-run orchards and plantations.”<sup>23</sup> Despite its high price (17 rubles), the item was in high demand, and local residents frequently sought out the blacksmith, willing to pay a “premium price” for a quality product. Finally, David Stamm, a craftsman from the village of Neu-Halbstadt, created a horse harness for the exhibition. The reins, featuring elements of leather and metal, were priced at 75 silver rubles.<sup>24</sup>

The Mennonites also displayed the simple tools they regularly manufactured, hoping to sell them to the exhibition's visitors. These included shovels, various types of rakes, chains, axes, hammers, and horseshoes.<sup>25</sup> Dietrich Jantzen presented wooden items priced at 20 rubles. Karl Lucas, a rope maker from Lindenau, presented fourteen of his products, ranging in price from 60 kopecks to 6 silver rubles.<sup>26</sup> At the end of the list of craft products, it was noted that all the items were in demand in the region.

In the silk section, Martin Hamm and Abraham Jantzen represented the Mennonite colonies. The exhibition featured two skeins of silk weighing 23 *lots*,<sup>27</sup> as well as cocoons. In the colonies, a pound of such silk cost 7.50 rubles. Jantzen, from the village of Tiege, displayed three hundred yellow and thirty-five (very rare) white cocoons.<sup>28</sup>

Philipp Wiebe ensured the exhibition included not only representation from the Mennonite colonies but also contributions from state peasants from the village of Novopavlovka (Novopavlivka) who had apprenticed with Mennonites. Their training had been initiated by Cornies in 1841, and had continued under Wiebe's leadership. Former apprentice Fyodor Dyak provided fifty ears of high-quality Arnautka spring wheat for the exhibition.<sup>29</sup> The price for a chetvert<sup>30</sup> of this wheat was 7 silver rubles.

State peasants presented samples of limestone mined from the right bank of the Molochna River. Lime, derived from limestone, was an important material used in construction throughout Tavrida province. Ukrainian blacksmith Alexei Voznyak from Novopavlovka presented a horseshoe he had crafted, with twelve nails (priced at 60 silver kopecks).<sup>31</sup>

The St. Petersburg exhibition was a significant event, and the state took on various responsibilities related to its organization. The St. Petersburg shipping company Nadezhda managed the transportation of the exhibits to the city. Wiebe personally visited the company's Kharkov (Kharkiv) office to sign the contract. According to the agreement, the cost of transporting exhibition goods, weighing approximately 240 kilograms, amounted to a substantial sum – 250 rubles and 30 kopecks. The Mennonites were prepared to contribute financially to their participation, and the state offered some discounts on transportation.<sup>32</sup> The shipment of the exhibits was completed in advance, on August 22, 1860.<sup>33</sup>

A total of fifty-five of exhibits were sent to the St. Petersburg



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In the early 1860s, Peter von Köppen, an official of the Ministry of State Domains, acknowledged Philipp Wiebe's significant contribution to the development of agriculture and industry.

became especially important to showcase the Mennonite village model as a positive example for the entire empire.

The Juschanlee farm, owned by Philipp Wiebe, who succeeded Johann Cornies as chairman of the Molotschna Agricultural Society, provided forty-eight samples of young trees.<sup>19</sup> The fleece of a four-year-old Saxon ram was also sent from this estate. The wool was highly valued and sold for 14.5 silver rubles per *pood*.<sup>20</sup>

About fifty ears of rye, wheat, barley, oats, millet, and alfalfa were displayed to showcase achievements in grain cultivation. The owners emphasized that these crops were grown without the use of fertilizers and that their impressive yields were evidence of their special approach to crop care.<sup>21</sup>

Wilhelm Bonnelis, a miller from Schoensee, submitted eight sacks of wheat grain. His products were meticulously sorted to demonstrate each step of its processing. The exhibition samples

Exhibition of Agriculture and Industry by the Mennonites. The collection of exhibits and of necessary funds was accomplished largely through the personal efforts of Wiebe. After the death of his father-in-law, Johann Cornies, in 1848, Wiebe had taken on a leadership role in the economy of the Mennonite colonies. In the early 1860s, an official of the Ministry of State Domains, state councillor Peter von Köppen, acknowledged Wiebe's significant contribution: "Philipp Wiebe is well-known to the Ministry of State Domains as a correspondent of the Scientific Committee and the manager of the so-called Berdiansk plantation. He greatly contributes to the implementation of the ministry's plans in the Novorossiysk region. . . . The numerous medals and other honorary prizes repeatedly granted to him at exhibitions are a clear testament to his contributions to agriculture and industry."<sup>34</sup>

In 1861, the Ministry of State Domains developed a project to establish a museum of folk industry, which can be seen as another educational program. It planned to display the best items from the St. Petersburg exhibition in the museum. According to Wiebe, forty-seven exhibits were transferred to the museum, as well as "other heavy items important for the local economy, which contribute income to the settlements."<sup>35</sup> For example, the museum was sent the samples of flour produced at the mill of Katarina Toews (a widow from the village of Schoensee) that were exhibited in St. Petersburg. Her samples demonstrated the various stages of flour production. Thus, different grades of flour were exhibited, ranging in price from 3.25 to 9 silver rubles.<sup>36</sup> Toews exported her product, marking a significant breakthrough for the regional flour industry. It may be assumed that the mill belonging to Toews was one of the best in the region. Different types of cheese, ham, and samples of tiles and bricks from Wiebe's facilities were also provided for the museum.<sup>37</sup>

## AGRICULTURAL EXHIBITION IN SIMFEROPOL

Mennonite products were well represented in the catalogue of the 1863 agricultural exhibition in Simferopol. The "Plant Kingdom" section featured twenty-four exhibits from the Mennonite colonies, including wheat from the Molotschna colony's harvests of 1857–1863, and exhibits from individual producers displaying their barley, rye, oats, corn, sorghum, millet, and other crops.<sup>38</sup> The section on processing industries had eleven Mennonite producers of flour and groats.<sup>39</sup> The expanding list of mills signalled the early growth of the private milling industry, although its peak – associated with steam-powered production – had not yet arrived.

Contrary to expectations, Mennonites did not present strong samples of vegetable crops (e.g., in potato production), though Isaak Friesen from the village of Rosenort exhibited twenty-six varieties of legumes.<sup>40</sup> Quite a few successful Mennonite producers were concentrated in the butter (seven participants) and tobacco (three participants) sections.<sup>41</sup> The horticulture section reflected the success of earlier efforts in agricultural development. Wiebe presented forty-six varieties of fruit tree seedlings from the village of Juschanlee. The fruit tree section abounded with seedlings of apple, pear, quince, apricot, plum, cherry, and sour cherry, from twenty-two producers.<sup>42</sup>

Among the most unexpected exhibits presented by Wiebe was the stump of a twenty-year-old poplar tree. Ivan Cornies exhibited part of the trunk of a seventeen-year-old oak tree that stood six *sazhen* (almost thirteen metres) tall. These exhibits confirmed the success of the forestry program initiated over twenty years earlier. In the livestock section, the Mennonite colonies were represented by Wiebe and Ivan Cornies showing graceful horses, well-fattened sheep, cattle, and pigs.<sup>43</sup>



Mennonite products were well represented in the catalogue of the 1863 agricultural exhibition held in Simferopol.



WIKIMEDIA COMMONS, ELEGANT VIEW OF THE INTERIOR (FROM RECOLLECTIONS OF THE GREAT EXHIBITION, MET, DT10407.JPG)

The tsarist state requested that Mennonites contribute to the Russian pavilion at the London World's Fair in 1862.

According to the catalogue, Johann Wiens of Petersburg led Molotschna in silk production, while the best honey and wax came from the Molotschna communal sheep farm.<sup>44</sup> The appearance in the catalogue of Mennonite machines marked a shift in the industry. The exhibition featured four craftsmen: Philipp Wiebe with his sugar beet cutting machine; Jacob Reimer (Karassan, Crimea) with a similar device; Jacob Wiebe, who presented a four-furrow steam-powered plow; and Gerhard Wall (Karassan) with his oil-pressing machine. The products were available for purchase for no more than 35 rubles.<sup>45</sup> The list of Mennonite exhibits concluded with the famous roof tiles manufactured on the estates of Philipp Wiebe and Ivan Cornies.<sup>46</sup>

#### LONDON INTERNATIONAL EXHIBITION

The participation of Mennonites in the St. Petersburg event gave them the opportunity to take the next step – to present their products at their first international exhibition, in London. The London International Exhibition of Industry and Art was a world's fair held from May to November of 1862. It attracted attention throughout Europe, as it showcased the many technological advances of the industrial revolution. Although

Mennonites did not attend the London exhibition in person, they considered it an honour to participate through their contributions.

Starting in 1861, Mennonites collaborated with the Society of Agriculture of Southern Russia (established in Odessa in 1828) to prepare items for the exhibition's Russian pavilion.<sup>47</sup> A special imperial commission, based in St. Petersburg, coordinated the selection of exhibits. It was planned that the pavilion would cover 13,000 square feet.<sup>48</sup> According to a letter to Philipp Wiebe, Mennonites and other rural representatives were expected to “represent Russia with dignity and as fully as possible.”<sup>49</sup> Collection points for exhibits were located in five transportation hubs: St. Petersburg, Riga, Warsaw, Odessa, and Tiflis (Tbilisi).

An official brochure about the exhibition circulating through provincial newspapers provided details about the structure and organization of the event. Mennonites would contribute to “Products of Agricultural, Mining, and Manufacturing.”<sup>50</sup> Correspondence between Philipp Wiebe and the members of the Scientific Committee of the Ministry of State Domains outlined the terms of Mennonite involvement in the London exhibition. The Ministry of State Domains requested that Mennonites



WIKIMEDIA COMMONS: FLEUVE OFFICIELLE A VOL D'OISEAU DE L'EXPOSITION UNIVERSELLE DE 1867.JPG

Under the leadership of Philipp Wiebe, the Mennonites contributed to the 1867 Paris Exposition.

contribute “samples of rural industry and crafts that are most characteristic of the southern provinces, or have gained popularity and trade.”<sup>51</sup> The state assumed responsibility for packing and shipping the items from St. Petersburg to London and back. The Mennonite exhibits for the London fair were received in January 1862.<sup>52</sup>

What did the Mennonites prepare for the London exhibition? Among the contributors living in the Mennonite colonies, there were both well-known and lesser-known members of the community. Philipp Wiebe and F. Klassen offered cheese, ham, wool (from various breeds of sheep), and dried fruits such as apples, pears, and plums. Miller Wilhelm Bonnelis provided flour of various grades, while Ivan Cornies offered samples of plant material.<sup>53</sup>

The owner of a woolen mill, Johann Klassen, showcased various examples of his products at the London exhibition: cloth, baize, and flannel. David Cornies provided woven baskets, Martin Hamm contributed crates, and Karl Lucas presented thirteen samples of rope products.<sup>54</sup> This may have been all the Mennonites could offer the world at the moment; however, it should be noted that these products were among the best in their respective categories in imperial Russia.

This time, in addition to agricultural products, it was proposed that the exhibition include the Mennonite wagon, which had become regionally famous. The organizing committee agreed to this suggestion but stipulated that the wagons must be dismantled and carefully packed.<sup>55</sup> The ministry covered all transportation expenses for delivering the wagons.<sup>56</sup> It may be presumed that

this decision stemmed from negotiations.

A curious situation emerged after the London exhibition. The exhibits that Philipp Wiebe had expected to be returned were never received; it appeared that they had been lost. In response to his persistent letters sent to the Guardianship Committee for Foreign Settlers, he was informed that, according to the decision of the administrators of the Russian section of the exhibition, the Mennonite products had been “transferred to museums in England and other countries, while the perishable foodstuffs, which had become moldy and spoiled, were discarded.”<sup>57</sup>

## PARIS EXPOSITION

The 1867 Paris Exposition stood out as one of the most significant international events of the mid-nineteenth century. Prominent writers such as Mark Twain, Alexandre Dumas, Victor Hugo, and many others recounted their memories of this exhibition.<sup>58</sup> Almost all the European monarchs, including Tsar Alexander II, visited the exhibition, and a special reception was organized for them. It is likely that the Russian tsar took particular interest in the Mennonite exhibits, recalling his visit to their settlements during his journey across the empire in 1837. The renowned Russian scientist Dmitry Mendeleev headed the exhibition’s Russian section. As he noted, the priorities of the exhibition were “first, ethnography, then fine arts, followed by machinery, fabrics, products of metallurgy, and agriculture.”<sup>59</sup>

The Russian section occupied eight galleries: the first two featured archaeological artifacts and works of art, while the remaining six displayed industrial and agricultural products.

These included numerous wooden items, such as peasant dwellings, a horse stable from the imperial stud farm, facilities for carriages and harnesses, and more.<sup>60</sup> The Mennonites, with their agricultural exhibits, fit with the overall concept and direction of the exhibition, although, as before, they did not attend in person.

Preparations for the exhibition began two years before the event. In 1865, the special commission responsible for the empire's participation in the exhibition was allocated 200,000 rubles for this purpose. The government covered expenses for transporting exhibits, insuring them in transit, renting exhibition space, and constructing and decorating the pavilions. When necessary, the commission collaborated with various state institutions to address organizational and financial matters.<sup>61</sup>

The Ministry of State Domains prepared a collection of agricultural products, and under the guidance of Philipp Wiebe, the Mennonites contributed to the construction of the imperial image.<sup>62</sup> Perhaps for the first time, the names of Mennonites resonated in distant and sophisticated France. Forty-seven exhibits were prepared for the event. The displays included plans of Mennonite colonies, which were exhibited alongside models of typical Russian peasant dwellings (*izbas*). The Mennonite participants in the exhibition were David Cornies (baskets), Karl Lucas from Liebenau (horse harnesses), Jakob Esau from Juschanlee (simple tools), Philipp Wiebe and Ivan Cornies (various of agricultural products), Bernard Warkentin from Altonau (seed samples), and Jacob Neufeld from Neu-Halbstadt (silk).<sup>63</sup>

Advances in technology were apparent in the basic agricultural machinery Mennonites sent to Paris. These items included Jacob Friesen's winnower, Gerhard Harder's cart (both artisans were from Orloff), and Johann Friesen's four-furrow plow (Altonau). A map of Orloff drawn by teacher Jantzen demonstrated the advantages of Mennonite agricultural practices.<sup>64</sup>

We have no evidence as to whether the Mennonites received any prizes. Given the intense competition and the many truly groundbreaking innovations on display, it is probable that their simple items failed to capture the jury's attention. However, after the exhibition, Philipp Wiebe received a Certificate of Honour from the tsarist state in recognition of the "modest" achievements of both himself and the Mennonites in general. It was reported that the Mennonite model farm plans had attracted the interest of experts and were gifted to the Paris Agricultural Academy.<sup>65</sup>

## IMPERIAL LIVESTOCK EXHIBITION

The exhibition activity of the 1860s concluded for the Mennonites with their participation in the Imperial Livestock Exhibition that took place in October 1869. The honorary president of the Imperial Free Economic Society, Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolaevich Romanov, served as curator of this all-Russian exhibition. The initiative for the exhibition came from the grand duke himself. In March 1869, Philipp Wiebe, who was already struggling with health challenges and preparing to step down from his position, received a letter from the commission organizing the event. As in the past, he was asked to take on the responsibility of selecting skilled livestock breeders and the

best livestock for the exhibition. Meanwhile, reports surfaced about Nicholas Nikolaevich's trip to the southern provinces to observe the state of animal husbandry in the region. The Grand Duke considered Mennonite participation in the St. Petersburg exhibition to be essential.<sup>66</sup>

According to the organizers, the primary aim of the exhibition was to show off various breeds of domestic livestock popular in the empire: dairy and dual purpose (beef and dairy) cow breeds, sheep, and fattened pigs.<sup>67</sup> The exhibition organizing committee was responsible not only for gathering the animals but also for their care during the event, and for arranging their transportation.<sup>68</sup> The exhibition imposed no social restrictions: landlords, tenants, peasants, and townspeople were all eligible to participate.<sup>69</sup>

By decision of Wiebe and other colony leaders, the honour of representing Mennonite agricultural achievements was granted to: Ivan Cornies (13 animals), Philipp Wiebe (9), Peter Schröder (Neuhof) (3), A. Penner (Orloff) (1), Johann Dyck (Rosenhof) (3), P. Schmidt (Steinbach) (4), Andrei Martens (Tashchenak) (5), Michael Hofer (Johannesruh) (1), P. Fast (state plantation in Berdiansk district) (4). The list of participants also included P. Warkentin (Blumstein), B. Warkentin (Altonau), Johann



The Russian pavilion at the Paris Exposition included plans of Mennonite colonies, which were exhibited alongside models of typical Russian peasant dwellings.

Cornies (Hochfeld), Ivan Neufeld (Hochfeld), and Daniel Schmidt (Steinbach).<sup>70</sup> Notably, former Ukrainian students of Johann Cornies and Philipp Wiebe – state peasants from the village of Novopavlovka (Yakov Solop, Kiril Shkurka, Ivan Timoshenko) – also participated in the exhibition.<sup>71</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The history of Mennonite participation in regional and international exhibitions provides a valuable snapshot of the development of Mennonite agriculture and industry on the eve of the Great Reforms, which transformed the social, legal, and administrative foundation of the empire. Industrial exhibitions were a platform for showcasing and disseminating information about their communities beyond government circles and to gain support from the broader multi-ethnic society.

Philipp Wiebe's correspondence reveals his pivotal role in the administration of the colonies after the death of Johann Cornies. He became a figure of regional and, to some extent, imperial stature. The exhibition catalogues reveal a fairly limited circle of participants and show that, by the mid-nineteenth century, a true

industrial elite had yet to emerge within Mennonite society. We still lack reliable information regarding the exhibition activity of the Chortitza colony. Given that Wiebe was responsible for both colonies, one may hypothesize that he primarily advocated for the Molotschna colony.

Through their involvement in regional, imperial, and international exhibitions, Mennonites, like other participants, stimulated business and forged contacts in the region and across the continent, fostering the progressive trends of cultural exchange and enrichment of national traditions.

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Nataliya Venger is a professor of history at Oles Honchar Dnipro National University, Ukraine, and a research associate at the University of Winnipeg.

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- 1 A version of this article was published as Nataliya Venger and Olena Khodchenko, "The Participation of the Molotschna Mennonites in the First Regional, National and International Exhibitions (Mid-19th Century)," *Modern Studies in German History* 50 (2024): 10–20.
- 2 For example, the Lepp and Wallmann agricultural machinery factory in Chortitza was awarded 29 gold, silver, and bronze medals at regional, all-Russian, and international exhibitions between 1858 and 1910. See State Archive of Zaporizhzhia Oblast (DAZO), f. 30, op. 1, spr. 1, ark. 159, 227; and DAZO, f. 30, op. 1, spr. 288, ark. 28–29.
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- 14 *Pervaia vystavka sel'skikh proizvedenii v Tavricheskoi gubernii*, 10.
- 15 DAOO, f. 89, op. 1, spr. 1966, ark. 18, 32.
- 16 DAOO, f. 89, op. 1, spr. 1966, ark. 29.
- 17 DAOO, f. 89, op. 1, spr. 1927, ark. 17 zv.
- 18 DAOO, f. 89, op. 1, spr. 1909, ark. 13.
- 19 DAOO, f. 89, op. 1, spr. 1909, ark. 2.
- 20 A *pood* is a historical unit of mass equal to 40 *funt* (Russian pounds) or 16.38 kilograms.
- 21 DAOO, f. 89, op. 1, spr. 1909, ark. 2–2 zv.
- 22 DAOO, f. 89, op. 1, spr. 1909, ark. 13.
- 23 DAOO, f. 89, op. 1, spr. 1909, ark. 12 zv.
- 24 DAOO, f. 89, op. 1, spr. 1909, ark. 13.
- 25 DAOO, f. 89, op. 1, spr. 1909 ark. 21 zv.
- 26 DAOO, f. 89, op. 1, spr. 1909, ark. 13–13 zv.
- 27 A *lot* is a historical unit of mass equivalent to 13.78 grams.
- 28 DAOO, f. 89, op. 1, spr. 1909, ark. 12 zv.
- 29 DAOO, f. 89, op. 1, spr. 1909, ark. 12.
- 30 A *chetvert* is a historical unit of capacity equivalent to 5.96 US bushels.
- 31 DAOO, f. 89, op. 1, spr. 1909, ark. 12.
- 32 DAOO, f. 89, op. 1, spr. 1909, ark. 4.
- 33 DAOO, f. 89, op. 1, spr. 1909, ark. 7.
- 34 DAOO, f. 89, op. 1, spr. 1929, ark. 19–19 zv.
- 35 DAOO, f. 89, op. 1, spr. 1927, ark. 21.
- 36 DAOO, f. 89, op. 1, spr. 1909, ark. 8 zv.
- 37 DAOO, f. 89, op. 1, spr. 1909, ark. 3 zv.
- 38 DAOO, f. 89, op. 1, spr. 1966, ark. 20–24. The producers were: David Penner (Rueckenau), P. Schmidt (Steinbach), G. Wiens (Rosenort), D. Penner (Rosenort), G. Jantzen (Tigerweide), W. Toews (Orloff), and A. Sawatzky (Tiegenhagen).
- 39 DAOO, f. 89, op. 1, spr. 1966, ark. 20–24. The group included following entrepreneurs: Johann Derksen and B. Buller (Berdiansk), a widow C. Toews (Schoensee), P. Schmidt (Steinbach), and W. Toews (Orloff).
- 40 DAOO, f. 89, op. 1, spr. 1966, ark. 24.
- 41 DAOO, f. 89, op. 1, spr. 1966, ark. 27–27 zv.
- 42 DAOO, f. 89, op. 1, spr. 1966 ark. 28 zv.–33.
- 43 DAOO, f. 89, op. 1, spr. 1966 ark. 33–33 zv.
- 44 DAOO, f. 89, op. 1, spr. 1966 ark. 35.
- 45 DAOO, f. 89, op. 1, spr. 1966 ark. 22 zv.
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- 47 M. P. Borovsky, *Istoricheskii obzor pyatidesiatiletnei deiatel'nosti imperatorskogo obshchestva sel'skogo khoziaistva Yuzhnoi Rossii s 1828 po 1878 god*. [Historical review of the fifty-year activity of the Imperial Society of Agriculture of Southern Russia from 1828 to 1878] (Odessa: Frantsov Printing House, 1878).
- 48 DAOO, f. 89, op. 1, spr. 1927, ark. 16–18, 30.
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- 50 DAOO, f. 89, op. 1, spr. 1927, ark. 17–24 zv.
- 51 DAOO, f. 89, op. 1, spr. 1927, ark. 31.
- 52 DAOO, f. 89, op. 1, spr. 1909, ark. 50.
- 53 DAOO, f. 89, op. 1, spr. 1909, ark. 52–52 zv.
- 54 DAOO, f. 89, op. 1, spr. 1909, ark. 52 "a".
- 55 DAOO, f. 89, op. 1, spr. 1927, ark. 15–15 zv.
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- 63 DAOO, f. 89, op. 1, spr. 2064, ark. 4–7.
- 64 DAOO, f. 89, op. 1, spr. 2064, ark. 4–7.
- 65 DAOO, f. 89, op. 1, spr. 2064, ark. 2.
- 66 DAOO, f. 89, op. 1, spr. 2115, ark. 22–22 zv.
- 67 DAOO, f. 89, op. 1, spr. 2115, ark. 6.
- 68 DAOO, f. 89, op. 1, spr. 1991, ark. 10.
- 69 DAOO, f. 89, op. 1, spr. 1991, ark. 17 zv.
- 70 DAOO, f. 89, op. 1, spr. 2115, ark. 43–47 zv.
- 71 DAOO, f. 89, op. 1, spr. 2115, ark. 45 zv.–46 zv.

# TARIFFS AND TAXES ON TRADE IN WEST PRUSSIA

Ingrid Peters-Fransen

In 1789, Mennonites began to migrate from Danzig and the surrounding territory of West Prussia to the Ukrainian lands of imperial Russia. Scholars have recognized that this migration had both push and pull factors. The push factors in West Prussia included Prussian militarization, threatening the ability of Mennonites to avoid military service, and restrictions on land ownership, which limited economic opportunity. The pull factors from the Russian empire included freedom of religion, represented through exemption from military service, and the offer of

land.<sup>1</sup> Overlooked by scholars has been the role of taxes on trade, similar to tariffs, imposed by the Prussian state on exports from the new province of West Prussia to the city of Danzig, which was still under Polish sovereignty. These taxes on trade might have weakened the economic circumstances of Mennonites in both Danzig and West Prussia.

What is a tariff? A tariff is a tax by one country on goods imported from another country. For example, suppose the United States imposes a 25 per cent tariff on Canadian steel.



Grain grown in the Vistula River valley was exported through Danzig to Amsterdam, a voyage by sea of about 1,500 kilometres. JEREMY WIEBE

Suppose that before the tariff, a Canadian steel producer sold a quantity of steel for \$10,000 and a US customer paid that amount. After the introduction of the tariff, if the Canadian producer were to continue to charge \$10,000 for the quantity of steel, the US customer would have to pay their government \$2,500 on top of the \$10,000 price. In this situation, it is likely the Canadian producer would lower their price so the price for the US customer does not rise by 25 per cent; however, it is unlikely the producer would drop the price enough to eliminate the full effect of the tariff. Given that the price of Canadian steel for the US customer would have increased, US customers would buy less Canadian steel and look at other sources of steel – say, US producers. US steel producers might in turn look at the increased price of Canadian steel to the US customer after the tariff and raise their prices. Therefore, as a result of the 25 per cent tariff levied on Canadian steel being imported into the United States, Canadian steel producers are worse off because they end up selling less at a lower price, US steel consumers are worse off because they pay a higher price and consequently might end up buying less, US steel producers are better off because they sell more at a higher price, and the US government collects the tariff revenue. Alternatively, a customs duty could be imposed by an exporting country on exports. This would have a similar effect of increasing prices in the importing country, reducing the quantity exchanged between the exporting and importing country, and making the producers in the exporting country worse off. Given the current discussion of tariffs, which are taxes on trade, being imposed on Canada and many other countries by the United States, it is interesting to consider the possible impact of taxes on trade on Mennonites in the past.

This year is the five hundredth anniversary of Anabaptism, a movement that had roots in Switzerland, where the first recorded adult baptisms of the movement took place, and the Low Countries (present-day Belgium and the Netherlands), and in other western European territories.<sup>2</sup> Mennonites in the Low Countries experienced severe persecution, especially in the southern provinces. In 1579, with the formation of the Dutch Republic through the union of seven Dutch provinces in revolt against Spanish rule, religious toleration came to the territory.<sup>3</sup> Persecution continued, however, in the southern Low Countries (present-day Belgium).

Before the Dutch Republic was formed, a significant Baltic grain trade developed between the Kingdom of Poland and the northern Netherlands. Merchants exported much of the grain grown in the Vistula River valley through the port of Danzig at the mouth of the Vistula to Amsterdam. At times, over 60 per cent of Baltic rye and wheat exports went through the port of Danzig and over 75 per cent of Baltic grain imports were destined for Amsterdam.<sup>4</sup> In the seventeenth century, the Dutch described the Baltic trade as the “mother of all trades.” This trade resulted in the development of the Dutch merchant marine and a shipbuilding industry that facilitated later trade with the Mediterranean and the East and West Indies.<sup>5</sup> It is hard to overstate its importance – in the eighteenth century, the Baltic grain trade exceeded

the tonnage of the trade between Europe and Asia.<sup>6</sup>

The voyage between Amsterdam and Danzig by sea was about 1,500 kilometres.<sup>7</sup> Ships travelling this route had to pass through the Danish Sound. In the fifteenth century, tolls were levied by the Danish on every ship that passed through the strait. They were collected at Elsinore, the point at which the strait is at its narrowest, and duly recorded. By the end of the sixteenth century, tolls were levied on the commodities being shipped rather than on ships. The Sound tolls were an important source of revenue for the Danish until they were discontinued in the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup> The accounts of the toll are an important source of information on Baltic shipping during the early modern period. Much of the data used in this article is based on the Sound Toll Register.<sup>9</sup>

From the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries, Danzig served as an important port for the Dutch, particularly for the export of grain. Initially rye was the primary grain export, although in later years wheat became important. In the late sixteenth century, over 80 per cent of the grain exported from the Baltic was rye and approximately 10 per cent was wheat; by the end of the eighteenth century, the percentage of rye was just under 50 and the percentage of wheat had increased to over 33.<sup>10</sup> Over the entire period, rye and wheat accounted for over 80 per cent of Baltic grain exports. Mennonites and other farmers grew much of this grain in the agrarian hinterland of the lower Vistula extending from Danzig to Thorn.

Mennonites were involved in the Baltic grain trade as merchants in Amsterdam<sup>11</sup> and Danzig<sup>12</sup> and as farmers in the Vistula valley.<sup>13</sup> How did Mennonites end up in Danzig and the Vistula valley, territory that would become West Prussia? The Teutonic Knights from their base in Marienburg ruled the region that would become known as West Prussia from 1309 until 1457, when they were defeated by a Polish-Lithuanian army.<sup>14</sup> The area became the Polish province of Royal Prussia in 1466.<sup>15</sup> This province included the city of Danzig, which had participated in the defeat of the Teutonic Knights. The Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, with one person serving as both monarch and duke, officially united as the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1569.<sup>16</sup> This union continued to be an elective monarchy with the Sejm (a bicameral governing council of nobles) choosing the monarch. In 1573, the Sejm approved the declaration of the Warsaw Confederation, which formalized and extended the policy of religious toleration as a response to the persecution of religious dissidents in other parts of Europe.<sup>17</sup>

Much of the area around Danzig and Marienburg was below sea level. Although the Teutonic Knights had built dikes, wars had depopulated the area and they were not maintained. In 1547, the Danzig city council sent Philip Edzema, a Frisian, to the Netherlands to recruit settlers to drain and cultivate the Danzig Werder, watery lands in the Vistula Delta that had been vacated.<sup>18</sup> Attracted by the promise of land and by the relative toleration of the country in a continent marked by persecution, Mennonites responded to the call. They became known for their success at land reclamation. In 1555, the Danzig council wrote

a letter to the Polish king in defence of the colonists: “These Dutch, gracious King, have achieved a wonderful reclamation in a short time so that instead of deserted fields, we will have 27 *Hufen* [453.6 hectares]. They have improved the land so much that we will receive 108 marks annually in tax from this village where we had earlier not received more than 39 marks.”<sup>19</sup> The letter describes four other villages that had benefited from the colonists. In total, the annual tax revenue had increased from 91 marks to 768 marks.

them. With great effort and industry, they have transformed the Marienburg Werders into productive farmlands and pastures.”<sup>21</sup>

Mennonites not only settled the Vistula Delta as farmers; they also found a new home in Danzig as merchants. Many merchants in the Dutch provinces, ruled by Spain, were attracted by the teachings of the Reformation. In 1567, the Spanish King Philip II assigned the Duke of Alba the task of restoring Catholicism in the Netherlands.<sup>22</sup> The duke was ruthless in his repression of religious dissenters. Dissenting merchants fled from Amsterdam



During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Mennonites emigrated from the Netherlands to Poland because of its religious toleration and economic opportunities.

Almost a century later, in 1642, King Władysław IV recognized the contribution of the Mennonites in a charter confirming privileges granted by his predecessors: “We are well aware of the manner in which the ancestors of the Mennonite inhabitants of the Marienburg islands (*Werder*), both large and small, were invited here with the knowledge and by the will of the gracious King Sigismund Augustus, to areas that were barren, swampy and unusable places in those islands. With great effort and at very high cost, they made these lands fertile and productive.”<sup>20</sup> This king’s praise of Mennonites was reiterated at the end of the seventeenth century by King Augustus II: “At our happy accession to the throne in Krakow on 20 September 1697, we confirmed and strengthened for the Mennonites . . . all the rights, privileges, and exemption from public responsibilities which had been granted

to Danzig on the well-travelled trade route in fear for their lives. After the formation of the Dutch Republic in 1579, with its policy of religious toleration, some of the merchants returned to Amsterdam but others – including some who were Mennonite – remained in Danzig.”<sup>23</sup>

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Mennonites emigrated from the Netherlands to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth because of religious toleration and economic opportunities. How did Mennonite farmers and merchants fare in their new homeland in Danzig and the Vistula valley? The 1776 census of Mennonites in West Prussia provides information about the economic status of Mennonites in West Prussia, including the Danzig suburbs.<sup>24</sup> There are five classifications for economic status: *gut* (good), *mittelmässig* (middling), *schlecht*

(bad), *arm* (poor), and *sehr arm* (very poor). The “very poor” were only found in almshouses. Mennonite farmers were identified by the terms *Bauer*, *Landwirt*, or *Landmann*. In general, a *Bauer* was worse off and a *Landmann* was better off than a *Landwirt*. This was affected by location (fertility of the soil and distance to market) as well as by size of landholding and number of servants. Similar data collected for the early modern period in Europe has around 20 per cent of the population as middling and a significant percentage as poor,<sup>25</sup> so overall farmers in West Prussia were doing well on average (25.8 per cent were middling and relatively few were poor).

Economic status of farmers, 1776 census  
of Mennonites in West Prussia

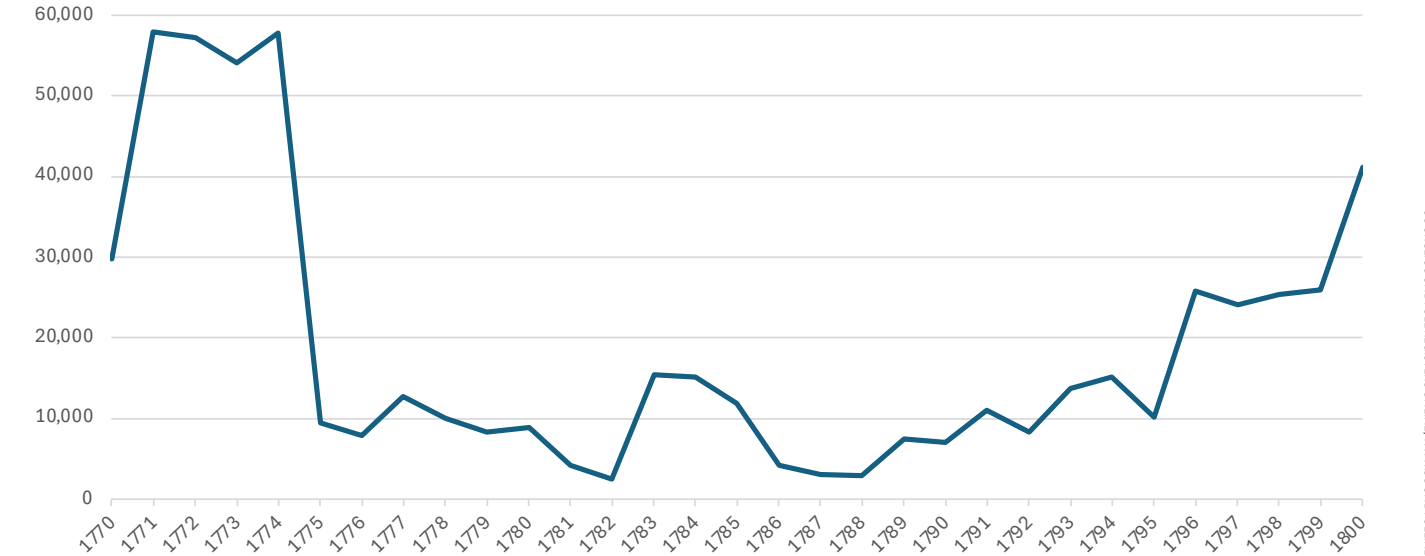
|          | Good | Middling | Bad   | Poor | Total |
|----------|------|----------|-------|------|-------|
| Bauer    |      | 1        | 23    |      | 24    |
| Landmann |      | 313      | 516   | 1    | 830   |
| Landwirt | 2    | 172      | 854   | 5    | 1,033 |
| Total    | 2    | 486      | 1,393 | 6    | 1,887 |

In terms of merchants in West Prussia, the census gives four designations: *Kaufmann*, *Krämer*, *Häker*, and *Hakenbüdner*. Of these, a *Kaufmann* would have been involved in foreign trade. The term likely describes merchants who dealt primarily in grain (although they would also have dealt in other commodities). The census lists four Mennonite merchants in the Danzig suburbs, three with the economic status of good and one middling; clearly they were doing well, likely as a result of the brisk Baltic grain trade.

In the late eighteenth century, taxes on trade caused disruption. With the First Partition of Poland in 1772, Frederick II, the king of Prussia, annexed Royal Prussia, excluding the cities of Danzig and Thorn, and renamed the province West Prussia.<sup>26</sup> The other powers involved in the partition, the Austrian and Russian empires, did not want to grant Prussia the port city of Danzig – the most important port on the Baltic. To throttle trade and thereby weaken Danzig economically and politically, making the city more likely to submit to Prussian annexation, Frederick imposed a 12 per cent customs duty on goods from West Prussia destined for Danzig.<sup>27</sup> If the goods ended up in the Prussian-controlled city of Elbing, 10 per cent of the duty was rebated, resulting in an effective duty of 2 per cent for Elbing.<sup>28</sup> There was a significant decline in the percentage of Baltic wheat and rye leaving the Danzig port during the decade 1771–1780. In 1761–1770, 47 per cent of Baltic rye exports had passed through the port of Danzig; this decreased to 14 per cent in 1771–1780, 15 in 1781–1790, and 14 in 1791–1795. In 1761–1770, 76 per cent of Baltic wheat exports went through the port of Danzig; this decreased to 44 per cent in 1771–1780, 29 in 1781–1790, and 30 in 1791–1795.<sup>29</sup>

The table of wheat exports leaving the port of Danzig shows that the volume of wheat through the port dropped precipitously from over 50,000 *last* per annum from 1771 to 1774 to approximately 10,000 *last* per annum for the period from 1775 to 1795 (1 *last* = 30.1 hectolitres). Some of these exports were re-directed to Königsberg, a port under Prussian control. In 1771–1780, 18 per cent of Baltic wheat exports went through the port of Königsberg; this increased to 38 per cent for 1781–1790, and 40 per cent for 1791–1795.<sup>30</sup> After the Second Partition in 1793, Prussia was granted the port of Danzig, and the taxes on trade were removed. After this change, the volume of wheat through the Danzig port increased to approximately 25,000 *last* per annum from 1796 to 1799, and reached 40,000 *last* in

Wheat exports from Danzig (in last), 1770–1800



1800. The customs duty impacted not only the volume of wheat exports but also their destination. In the early years of the duty, most wheat exports from Danzig were shipped to Amsterdam; after its removal two decades later, only 10 per cent of the wheat exports from Danzig were destined for Amsterdam, with the majority of wheat exports headed to England.

Imposing a tax on trade increases prices for consumers and decreases the quantity demanded by consumers as a result. How responsive is the quantity demanded of a commodity to price changes? In economics, this is known as the price elasticity of demand. Evidence shows that the demand for goods with few substitutes will be less responsive to a change in price. If you must buy something, then an increase in price is less of a deterrent to buying it compared to if there were good alternatives available. Necessities will be less responsive to a change in price than luxuries. Wheat was a desirable commodity, much preferred to rye for those people who were able to afford the more expensive wheat. Because rye was a necessity, the impact on rye exports of the customs duty was not nearly as significant. Even at a higher price, rye was a staple in the daily diet of most Europeans, with no good cheaper substitutes. In economic terms, rye as a necessity was price-inelastic.<sup>31</sup>

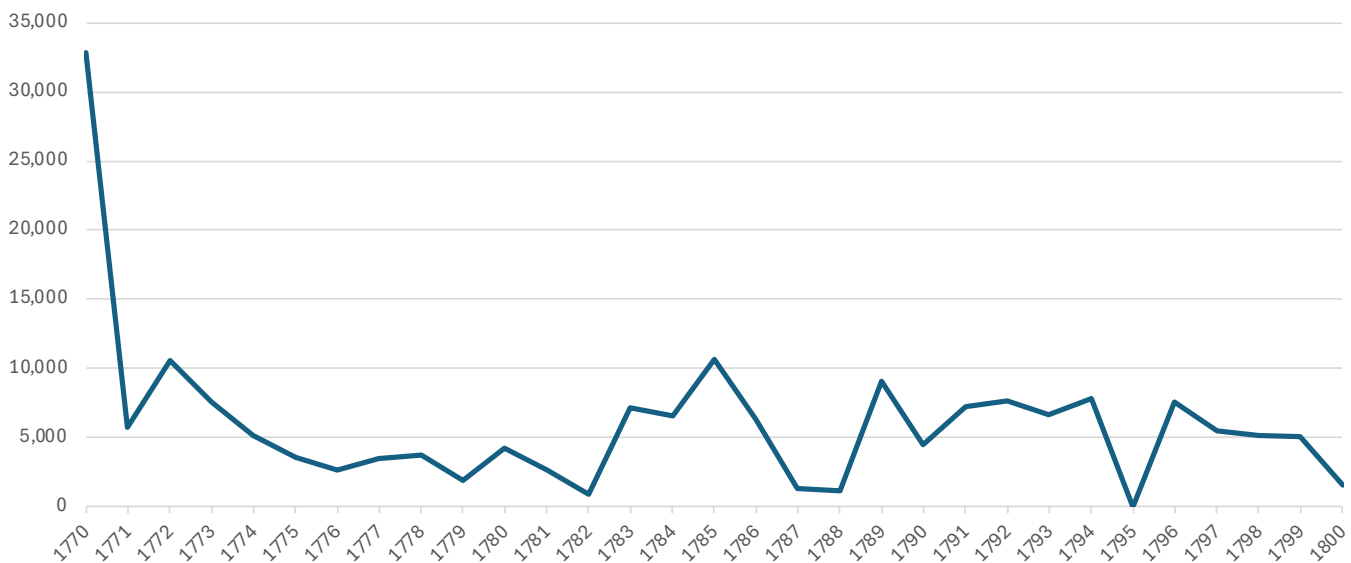
From 1770 to 1771, there was a significant drop in rye exports, from over 30,000 last to just under 6,000 last. This drop corresponded to a significant increase in wheat exports during the same period, from about 30,000 last to about 58,000 last. It is not known why a shift from rye to wheat occurred in 1771, but the chart of rye exports shows no marked decline in rye exports as a result of the imposition of the tax on trade in the mid-1770s. There was also no noticeable rebound after the duty was removed in the mid-1790s. Rye exports during the period of the duty seem to hover around 5,000 last per year. This is consistent with economic theory – rye as a necessity was less responsive to changes in price than wheat as a relative luxury item.

Overall, however, the tax on exports leaving West Prussia destined for Danzig had a negative impact. The port of Danzig was adversely affected. In 1777, a visitor from England, Nathaniel William Wraxall, returned to Danzig after four years away: “This celebrated city . . . excites at present only sensations of concern and commiseration. It is evidently much declined in population, industry, and riches, since I last visited it, only four years ago. Frederic holds it closely invested, though without the appearance of hostility; and there can be little question that the blockade will finally compel the inhabitants to surrender on terms, if not at discretion.”<sup>32</sup>

What was the impact of the tax on trade on Mennonite merchants and farmers? We have no direct evidence; however, we do have anecdotal evidence that residents of the Danzig environs were adversely affected. Hermann Gottlieb Mannhardt, a Mennonite pastor in Danzig during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, wrote the following reflection about that period: “In the 1760s the economic conditions of the congregation had improved to the point that the income for the alms fund rose gradually from 3,492 florins in 1757 to 6,751 florins in 1765. They remained at this level approximately until 1770. Then in the following years they rose again until 1773. In that year they reached their highest level, 8,087 florins. Then there was a gradual drop, a sign that the times were getting worse. In 1782, only 5,177 florins came in. During the 1780s the income was between 5,000 and 6,000 florins and then fell to 3,169 from 1790 to 1798.”<sup>33</sup> Mannhardt described the drop in donations from 1773 to 1782 (or the 1780s, in general) and then again in the 1790s as “a sign that the times were getting worse.” One of the factors contributing to these worsening times in the Danzig environs was the imposition of the tax on trade with Danzig.

The Prussian administration of the area affected not only Danzig’s importance as a port but also the relationship of Mennonites with the government. Frederick II was willing to

**Rye exports from Danzig (in last), 1770–1800**



SOURCE: SOUNDTOLL REGISTERS ONLINE: WWW.SOUNDTOLL.NL

extend the Mennonite military exemption that had been granted under Polish rule, but at a price. In lieu of military service, Mennonites as a community were to make an annual payment of 5,000 thalers towards the Culm military academy.<sup>34</sup> He also imposed restrictions on land ownership by Mennonites, because military service was tied to landholding and he wanted to curtail any reduction in the size of his army.<sup>35</sup> When Frederick II was succeeded by Frederick William II in 1786, he continued both the military exemption granted to the Mennonites and the 5,000 thaler cadet tax. He also made land acquisition by Mennonites more difficult by writing the restrictions on Mennonite landholding into law.<sup>36</sup>

The intensification of Prussian militarism, which added cost to the continuation of Mennonite military exemption, and the decrease in economic opportunities that resulted from restric-

tions on landholding were important push factors that induced Mennonites into leaving West Prussia in 1789 and after. The negative impact of customs duties on the port of Danzig and on grain export opportunities for Mennonite farmers in the Vistula Delta could also have been a contributing factor. In terms of economic motives for the emigration of Mennonites from Danzig and West Prussia to the Ukrainian lands of imperial Russia in 1789, we cannot exclude the possibility that the imposition of taxes on trade in the mid-1770s, which were only lifted by the mid-1790s, played a role.

In her career, Ingrid Peters-Fransen taught undergraduate economics. She enjoys combining her interest in Mennonite history with issues related to economics. Now retired, she enjoys travelling – mostly to visit her grandchildren.

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9 Soundtoll Registers Online, <https://www.soundtoll.nl/>.

10 Van Tielhof, *Mother of All Trades*, 37.

11 In the first half of the seventeenth century, there were three grain merchants in the Mennonite church called By the Tower in Amsterdam. Mary Sprunger, "Being Mennonite: Neighborhood, Family, and Confessional Choice in Golden Age Amsterdam," in *Religious Minorities and Cultural Diversity in the Dutch Republic: Studies Presented to Piet Visser on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday*, ed. August den Hollander, Alex Noord, Mirjam van Veen, and Anna Voolstra (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 154–56.

12 Van Tielhof mentions the Hooft brothers, Jan and Gerrit, as Mennonite grain merchants in the late sixteenth century. *Mother of All Trades*, 27–28. The 1776 census of Mennonites in West Prussia lists multiple names with the occupation of merchant (*Kaufmann*). They did not have the rights of burghers and therefore did not have the right to engage in foreign trade, but officials turned a blind eye to this. Maria Bogucka, "Mentalität der Bürger von Gdansk in XVI.–XVII. Jh.," *Studia Maritima* 1 (1978): 68. They are not expressly identified as grain merchants, but given the centrality of the Baltic grain trade to the Danzig economy, one can assume that part of the foreign trade they would have been involved in was the grain trade.

13 It is typically assumed that peasant farmers like the Mennonites did not produce for the export market; rather, they produced for their own needs. A recent unpublished paper by the author, "Domestic and Export Market Potential of Mennonite Farmers in Late-Eighteenth Century West Prussia," shows that the economic status of Mennonite farmers depended significantly on size of landholding and access to the export market. Mennonites constituted 10 per cent of the population in Marienburg, the most fertile county of West Prussia, and held 25 per cent of the arable land. Hans-Jürgen Bömelburg, *Zwischen polnischer Ständegesellschaft und preußischem Obrigkeitsstaat: Vom Königlichen Preußen zu Westpreußen (1756–1806)* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 1995), 446; and August Meitzen, *Der Boden und die landwirtschaftlichen Verhältnisse des Preussischen Staates*, vol. 4 (Berlin: Verlag von Paul Parey, 1869), 157. Given that some Mennonites held relatively large plots of very fertile land, it would seem that at least these farmers were able to provide considerably more than would be necessary for self-sufficiency.

14 Karin Friedrich, *The Other Prussia: Royal Prussia, Poland and Liberty, 1569–1772* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1.

15 Friedrich, *The Other Prussia*, 23.

16 Peter J. Klassen, *Mennonites in Early Modern Poland & Prussia* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), xiii.

17 Klassen, *Mennonites in Early Modern Poland*, 205.

18 Klassen, *Mennonites in Early Modern Poland*, 29–30.

19 Horst Penner, *Die ost- und westpreußischen Mennoniten in ihrem religiösen und sozialen Leben in ihren kulturellen und wirtschaftlichen Leistungen*, vol. 1, 1526 bis 1772 (Weierhof: Mennonitischer Geschichtsverein, 1978), 398.

20 Peter J. Klassen, "A Homeland for Strangers and an Uneasy Legacy," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 66, no. 2 (Apr. 1992): 119. The adversity is captured in the German adage, "Die erste Generation hat den Tod, die zweite die Not, und die dritte erst das Brot" (The first generation has death, the second has hardship, and only the third has bread).

21 Klassen, *Mennonites in Early Modern Poland*, 202.

22 Van Tielhof, *Mother of All Trades*, 17.

23 Van Tielhof, *Mother of All Trades*, 27–28. Cornelis Pietersz Hooft, who was a Libertarian, fled Amsterdam for Danzig and then later returned to Amsterdam to work as a grain merchant. His two brothers Jan and Gerrit, who were Mennonite, remained in Danzig to work as part of a family business of grain merchants.

24 Glen Penner, comp., "The Complete 1776 Census of Mennonites in West Prussia," version 8, [https://mennonitegenealogy.com/prussia/1776\\_West\\_Prussia\\_Census.pdf](https://mennonitegenealogy.com/prussia/1776_West_Prussia_Census.pdf).

25 For example, the distribution, based on wealth, for late eighteenth-century London was 2 to 3 per cent upper class and 16 to 21 per cent middle class. L. D. Schwarz, "Income Distribution and Social Structure in London in the Late Eighteenth Century," *Economic History Review*, n.s., 32, no. 2 (May 1979): 254–56. Jürgen Kocka provides a significantly lower estimate of 5 per cent middle class for nineteenth-century Germany, but he focuses on the economic and the educated middle class of the city and specifically excludes peasants, which would have best described the Mennonite farmers. Jürgen Kocka, "The Middle Classes in Europe," *Journal of Modern History* 67, no. 4 (Dec. 1995): 784.

26 Mark Jantzen, *Mennonite German Soldiers: Nation, Religion, and Family in the Prussian East, 1772–1880* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press), 26.

27 Van Tielhof notes that the Prussian policy of cutting off Danzig from its hinterland through customs duties was effective. *Mother of All Trades*, 61.

28 August Skälweit, *Acta Borussia: Getreidehandelspolitik*, vol. 4, *Die Getreidehandelspolitik und die Kriegsmagazinverwaltung Preußens, 1756–1806* (Berlin: Verlag von Paul Parey, 1931), 29.

29 Van Tielhof, *Mother of All Trades*, 338–39.

30 Van Tielhof, *Mother of All Trades*, 338–39.

31 There was a shift to growing potatoes, a New World plant, in Europe in the eighteenth century, and by the end of the eighteenth century, rye bread had been partially replaced by potatoes as the basic foodstuff for the poor in some parts of Europe, but rye continued to be an important source of calories for much of the population. Cor Trompetter, *Agriculture, Proto-Industry and Mennonite Entrepreneurship: A History of the Textile Industries in Twente, 1600–1815* (Amsterdam: NEHA, 1997), 42.

32 Quoted in Bömelburg, *Zwischen polnischer Ständegesellschaft und preußischem Obrigkeitsstaat*, 392.

33 H. G. Mannhardt, *The Danzig Mennonite Church: Its Origin and History from 1569–1919*, trans. Victor G. Doerksen, ed. Mark Jantzen and John D. Thiesen (North Newton, KS: Bethel College, 2007), 130.

34 Max Bär, *Westpreußen unter Friedrich dem Großen*, vol. 1 (1909; repr., Osnabrück: Otto Zeller, 1965), 541.

35 On the difficulties Mennonite had buying land in 1777, see Bömelburg, *Zwischen polnischer Ständegesellschaft und preußischem Obrigkeitsstaat*, 447.

36 Bär, *Westpreußen unter Friedrich dem Großen*, 1:549.

# PREACHING IN THE WEST RESERVE

## Three Itinerant Mennonite Ministers

Donald Stoesz

In 1893, Abraham Doerksen was selected as a minister of the newly formed Sommerfeld Mennonite Church. He was ordained a bishop the following year.<sup>1</sup> Doerksen served in that capacity until 1922, when he moved together with about one hundred families to Mexico. He continued his ministry in Mexico until his death in 1929.

David M. Stoesz, son of East Reserve Chortitzer Bishop David Stoesz, moved to the West Reserve in 1891 and became a Sommerfelder minister in 1912.<sup>2</sup> He and his family moved with Bishop Doerksen to Mexico in 1922. Dissatisfied with life there, David returned with his family to southern Manitoba in 1923, and continued serving in the Sommerfeld Church until his death in 1934.

Born in 1892, Cornelius G. Stoesz grew up in the Sommerfeld Church before joining the Rudnerweider Church in 1937.<sup>3</sup> His father, Cornelius W. Stoesz, had been a Sommerfelder minister (1920–1925), and his grandfather, a Chortitzer minister (1865–1900). Cornelius G. Stoesz was chosen as a minister of the Rudnerweider Church in 1937 and served the church until his death in 1972.

These three ministers kept detailed log books of the sermons they preached. Sommerfeld Church Bishop Abraham Doerksen kept record of the 767 sermons that he preached in his career.<sup>4</sup> Sommerfeld Minister David M. Stoesz kept track of his 887 preaching assignments from 1912 to 1934.<sup>5</sup> Rudnerweider Minister Cornelius Stoesz kept a log book of 507 sermons that spanned the years 1937 to 1955.<sup>6</sup>

These service schedules indicate the date, location, and Scripture text used for each of the sermons that they preached. Abraham Doerksen's worship schedule can be found in Peter Bergen's *History of the Sommerfeld Mennonite Church*.<sup>7</sup> The worship schedules of David M. Stoesz and Cornelius G. Stoesz are included in my book *Canadian Prairie Mennonite Ministers' Use of Scripture: 1874–1977*.<sup>8</sup>

These worship schedules list over fifty villages on the West Reserve where these sermons were preached. Each minister made a circuit of preaching, visiting between fifteen and thirty congregations in their denomination.<sup>9</sup> Church members and their ministers saw themselves as belonging to a *Gemeinde* (church community) rather than to a specific congregation. The ministers preached on behalf of the entire *Gemeinde*. The bishop was the only minister who could conduct baptismal and communion services. The *Gemeinde* was led by a ministerial committee (*Lehrdienst*) headed by a bishop. This communal approach to ministry allows for a broad overview of the dominant Scripture texts, themes, rituals, and occasions that were relevant to the religious community. I will focus on four themes reflected in the Scripture verses used by these three ministers: evangelism, supplication, the Second Coming, and nonresistance.

### EVANGELISM

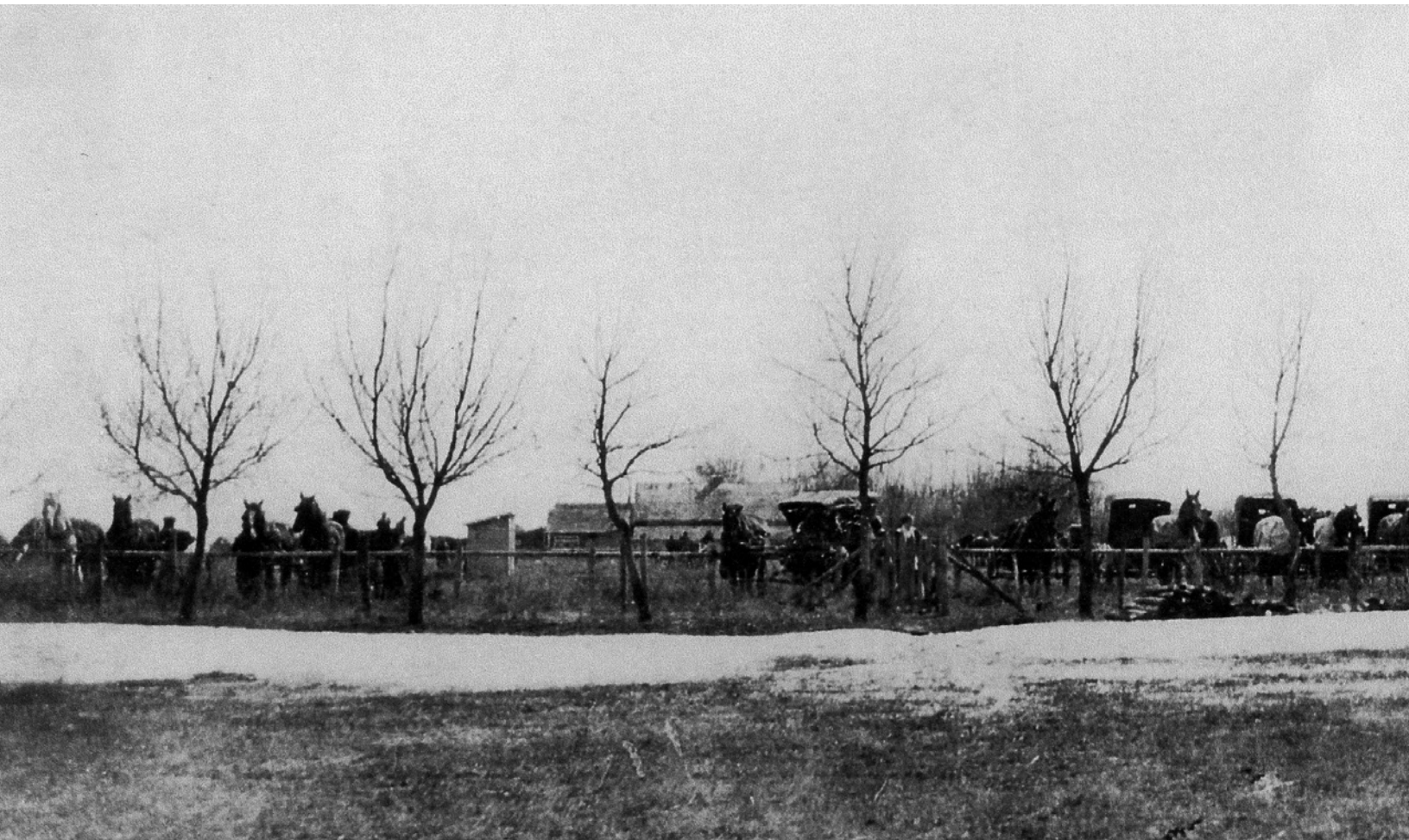
As I compiled the Scripture verses used by these ministers, I discovered that nearly 19 per cent of their sermons were dedicated to evangelism, with an emphasis on repentance and new birth.<sup>10</sup> This emphasis was revealing because two of the ministers were from the Sommerfeld Mennonite Church, which was not known for evangelism. The church was formed in 1893 when 88 per cent of the membership of the original Bergthal Mennonite Church, in Manitoba's West Reserve, left their church because it had introduced too many innovations. Under the leadership of Bishop Abraham Doerksen, the Sommerfeld Church maintained the traditions of following a lectionary of Scripture readings and songs, ministers writing sermons and reading them from the pulpit (rather than speaking freely), holding catechetical instruction during the Easter season worship services, and singing from the German *Gesangbuch* hymnal.<sup>11</sup>

Sommerfelders who found these traditional practices confining were attracted to a renewal movement that resulted in

21 per cent of the congregation's membership starting the Rudnerweider Mennonite Church in 1937.<sup>12</sup> The four ministers and 915 members who left felt that the Sommerfeld Church was not evangelistic enough.<sup>13</sup> The Rudnerweider Mennonite Church was started so that believers could

Doerksen between 1894 and 1922, and 17 per cent of the sermons of Sommerfeld Minister David M. Stoesz between 1912 and 1934, were dedicated to evangelical themes.<sup>17</sup>

Cornelius G. Stoesz (1892–1976) devoted 10 per cent of his sermons to conversion. He joined the Rudnerweider Church



experience “Christ in a new and intimate way” and find “in Him a new vision for ministry.”<sup>14</sup>

One might assume based on the events of 1893 and 1937 that the Sommerfeld Church was not committed to evangelism. The entry on evangelism in the *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online* reflects this premise, stating that “the spirit of evangelism . . . remains extinct in such groups in North America as the Old Order Amish, the Old Order Mennonites, and the Old Colony Mennonites.”<sup>15</sup> The Sommerfelders would be included among these tradition-bound, conservative groups.

Two factors belie this assumption. First, the Sommerfeld Church grew from a congregation of 2,500 (including children) in 1893 to nearly 7,300 in 1926. Fifty-five per cent of the Mennonite population on the West Reserve in southern Manitoba in 1926 belonged to the Sommerfeld Mennonite Church.<sup>16</sup>

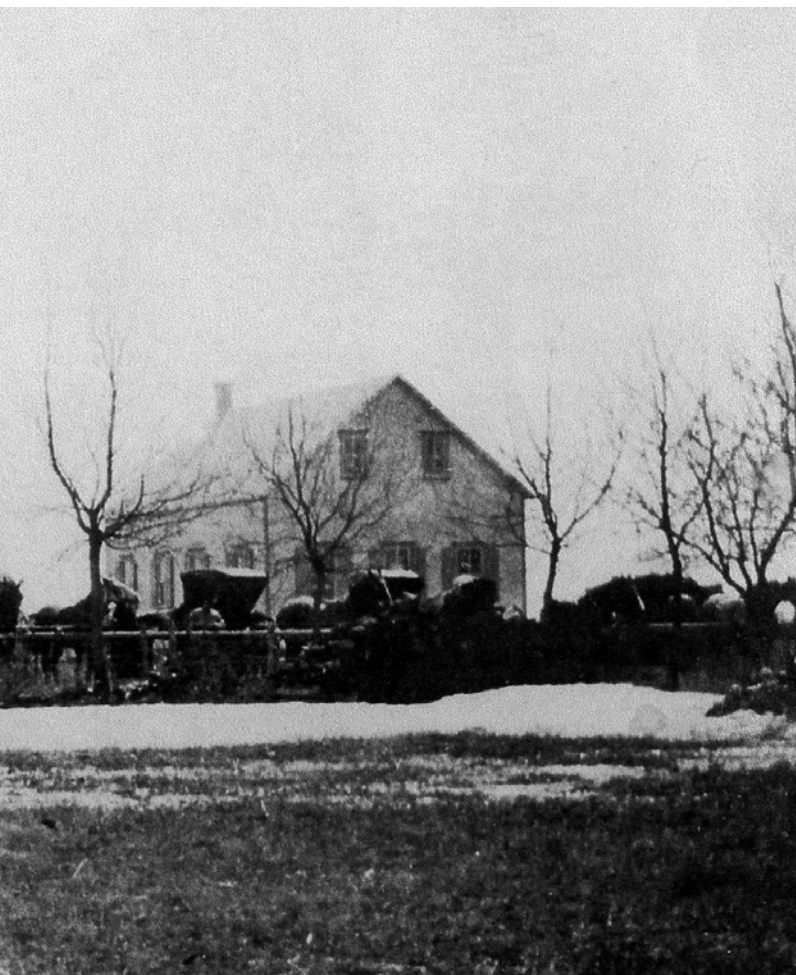
Second, analysis of sermon texts demonstrates that revivalism was alive and well within this “ritual-oriented” church: 26 per cent of the sermons preached by Sommerfeld Bishop Abraham

at forty-five years old. Called to the ministry during this time, Stoesz continued the Sommerfelder tradition of writing and reading his sermons until 1955. Conversion, revival, and evangelism were integral to these ministers’ preaching.

#### HONEY AND VINEGAR

I grew up in a Mennonite church in which evangelism was conducted on the basis of guilt-laden proclamations about the wrath of God, intended to bring about repentance and conversion. We as young people flocked to catechism classes so that we could avoid God’s punishment. Over half of the sermons reflected this kind of sin-oriented theology. Abraham Doerksen used Jeremiah 4:3–4 at a New Year’s service to warn the congregation that God’s wrath would burn everything in its path if they did not turn back to God. Elijah called fire down from heaven in 1 Kings 18 to convince the Israelites to follow God rather than Baal. Psalm 50 declared that God was a devouring fire that would consume the people of Israel if they did not offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving.

Passages from the New Testament such as Hebrews 3:12–14 and Hebrews 4:1–13 were also cited. Doerksen and David M. Stoesz compared their congregation to the Israelites in the wilderness, where they turned away from God and worshipped idols. Believers would not reach the promised land if they hardened



their hearts and became rebellious. The three ministers preached eighty-three times on the above five passages of Scripture.

Given this “vinegar” approach, I was not prepared for the discovery that Doerksen and David M. Stoesz preached in total eighty-five times on Matthew 9:13, where after calling the tax collector Matthew as his disciple, Jesus declares to the Pharisees that he desires mercy for the sick. He had come to save the lost, not the righteous.

A similar emphasis was evident in the ministers’ use of Luke 15:1–10 and Luke 19:1–10. The woman described in Luke 15 celebrated together with friends and neighbours because she had found a lost coin. Jesus declared that there is similar joy in heaven when a single sinner repents.

Luke 19 has Jesus eating at another tax collector’s table, this time at the house of Zacchaeus. After dining with Jesus, Zacchaeus promises to give half of his possessions to the poor. Jesus concludes his stay at Zacchaeus’s house with the words, “The Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.” David and Cornelius Stoesz preached forty-seven times on these two

passages. Honey was as effective as vinegar in bringing about repentance and renewal.

## SERMONS OF SUPPLICATION

I had assumed that the ministers would use the Old Testament sparingly. Only 15 per cent of the Scripture texts prescribed for worship by the one-year Lutheran lectionary employed by the ministers were from the Old Testament. This lectionary is included under the title “Instruction in Songs”<sup>18</sup> at the beginning of the *Gesangbuch*, which the ministers consulted on a regular basis.

I was proven wrong yet again. One hundred and sixty-four sermons quoted prayers of supplication for healing and deliverance from ten passages from the Psalms. Psalm 72:12–13 and Psalm 73:21–24 describe God delivering the needy and bestowing honour on believers. Psalm 34 announces that God will save believers from their fears and plight. Psalm 102 assures believers that they can live secure in God’s steadfast presence. Psalm 69:6 calls on God to be faithful to those who hope in him.

Scripture passages from the Prophets were also used. Isaiah 26:9 speaks about yearning after God and earnestly seeking him. Isaiah 49:14–16 compares God to a mother who never forgets her children. Jeremiah 17:14 announces that God heals and saves. Daniel received a spirit of wisdom and understanding when he brought his supplications to God (Daniel 9:20–21). God told Haggai to be courageous because God’s spirit abided with him (Haggai 2:5–6). Doerksen and the Stoeszes preached sixty-seven times on these verses from the Prophets. Overall, these three ministers based 19 per cent of their sermons on the Old Testament,<sup>19</sup> while Old Testament texts represented 15 per cent of Scripture passages included in the lectionary.<sup>20</sup>

These sermons of supplication reinforced a sense of belonging and brought comfort to members of the congregation. Preaching about the mercy and salvation of God was as much a part of the Psalms and Prophetic writings as the story of the New Testament. Such sermons complemented the emphases by these ministers on repentance and discipleship.

## PREPARING FOR THE SECOND COMING

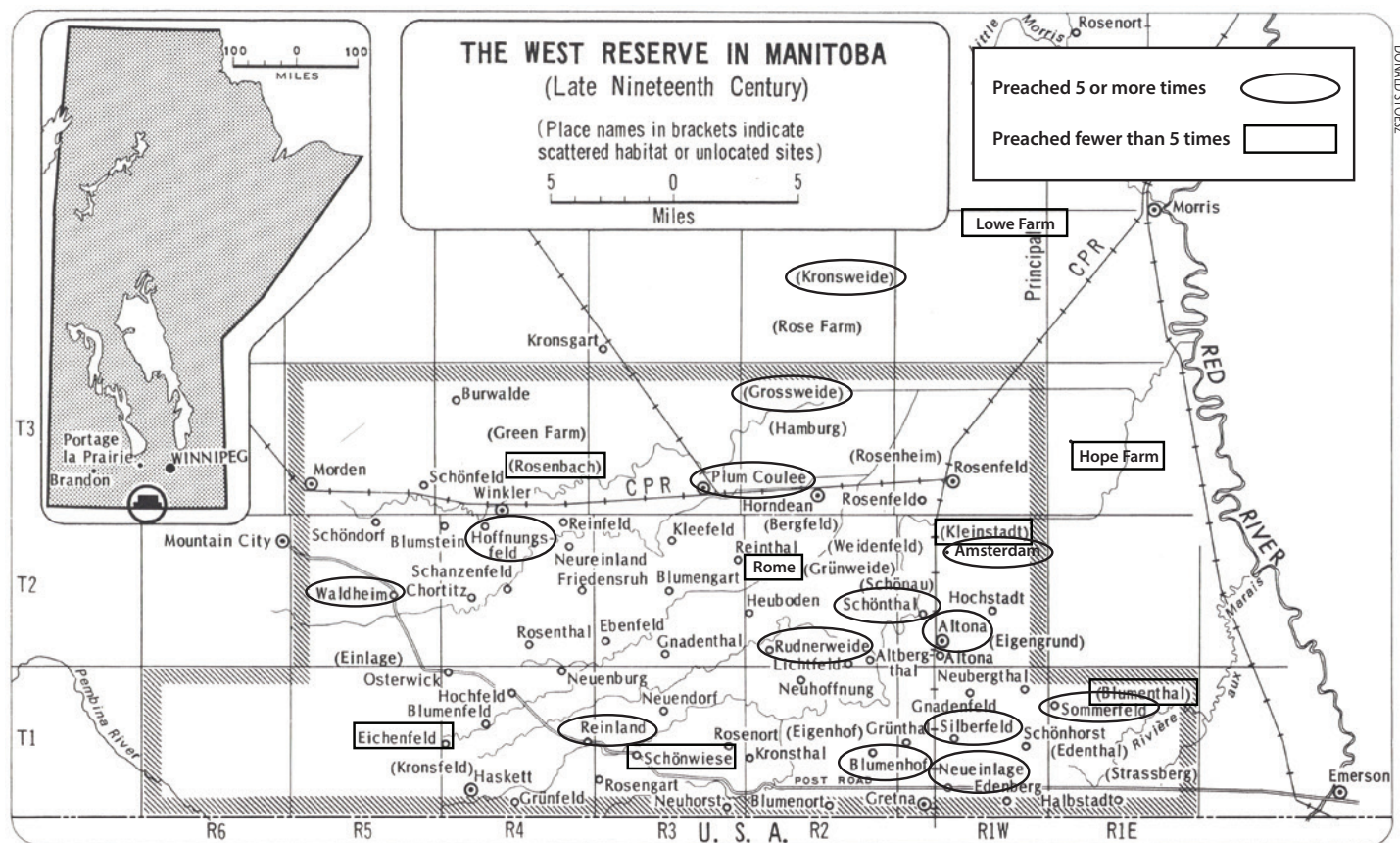
Sermons on the Last Judgment were regularly preached as preparation for Christmas. This emphasis made sense since many lectionary texts for Advent had to do with the Second Coming.

Jesus speaks about the Last Judgment in Matthew 25:31–46. Luke 21:25–30 envisions “the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory.” John 1:1–14 describes John the Baptist as “a witness to testify to the light.” John 1:19–28 has him “crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord.’”

Epistle texts were similar in their emphasis on the Second Coming. Romans 13:11–14 exhorted Christians to “wake from sleep” because “salvation is nearer to us now than when

In 1913, the Sommerfeld Church in Silberfeld opened and became part of the preaching circuit. MAID: MENNONITE HERITAGE ARCHIVES (MHA), ORG-PHOTO COLL 761-67





Locations of Abraham Doerksen's preaching assignments. Facing page: Sommerfelder Bishop Peter Toews with his wife Maria Klassen Toews. Toews is dressed in traditional ministerial dress.

we became believers." Philippians 4:4–7 combined the joy and celebration surrounding the incarnation of Jesus with anticipation of the Second Coming. "Rejoice in the Lord always. . . . The Lord is near. . . . The peace of God . . . will guard your hearts." The three ministers preached 107 times on these six Gospel and Epistle texts during Advent.

Regarding the Advent Scripture passages that Pope Gregory selected for the one-year lectionary on which the Lutheran lectionary was based, church historian Hughes Oliphant Old, an authority on the subject, remarks: "That one should read the sayings of Jesus on the end times as preparation for Christmas is the sort of thing one might expect from the Jehovah's Witnesses or other Adventist groups. But it makes consummate sense in the light of Gregory's sermons on Ezekiel, which he preached when the barbarians began to march on Rome. When times are bad Christians lift their eyes to the coming of the Lord, that is, to the second coming, and that is certainly what these Gospels do."<sup>21</sup>

The three Mennonite ministers also preached on other Scripture passages that had to do with the Second Coming during Advent. Abraham Doerksen used Isaiah 64:1 to ask God to "tear open the heavens and come down." He preached on Revelation 22:12–20, depicting faithful Christians waiting for Christ's return. Cornelius Stoez preached on Luke 12:35–36. Luke asked his readers to "be dressed for action and have your lamps lit" so they could open the door to their master when he returned from the wedding banquet. These two ministers preached fifty-three

times on these apocalyptic Scriptures during Advent.

I have seldom heard a sermon on the Second Coming during the Advent season. More familiar to me are the angels appearing to Mary and Joseph, the coming of the wise men, the visit of the shepherds, and the celebration of Christ's birth. The theme of the Second Coming of Christ was generally reserved for New Year's services or revival meetings. That future eschatology was an integral part of these ministers' sermons during the first Advent came as a surprise.<sup>22</sup>

## NONRESISTANCE AND SALVATION

Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary professor Erland Waltner introduces his Believers Church Bible Commentary on 1 Peter by remarking that, as a young seminarian, his desire to be both a nonresisting Christian (his "Mennonite ethical heritage") and an evangelical believer came together while studying 1 Peter 2:21–25. Verses 22 and 23 affirm the nonresistant aspect of Jesus's ministry: "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly." The next two verses link this act of nonresistance to Jesus's atonement and the justification and sanctification of believers: "He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian



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Bishop Abraham Doerksen's farmhouse in Sommerfeld, Manitoba.

of your souls." Waltner was struck by the correlation: "There I saw Jesus Christ both as the Supreme Pattern of nonretaliatory love and as the Redeemer, dying on the cross for human sin and thus making our salvation possible."<sup>23</sup>

Waltner shows how these verses were included in the writings of early Anabaptists such as Dirk Philips, Menno Simons, Michael Sattler, and Pilgram Marpeck.<sup>24</sup> The Swiss Brethren also included 1 Peter 2:20–24 as a foundational text in the discipleship section of their 1540 concordance.<sup>25</sup> But what role did this text play in southern Manitoba during the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century?

According to their log books, Cornelius G. Stoesz preached on 1 Peter 2:21 twenty-four times over the course of his ministry,

and fifteen times on 1 Peter 2:24. David M. Stoesz preached thirty-six times on 1 Peter 2:24. These sermons were preached for New Year's Day and for communion, which was celebrated twice a year.

Doerksen preached eight times on Christ's atonement as detailed in 1 Peter 1:18–19, and Cornelius G. Stoesz preached on the passage once. Doerksen and David M. Stoesz each preached on the ethical injunctions in 1 Peter 1:22–23 twenty-one times. This shows that these Mennonite ministers operated within the stream of Anabaptist thought which viewed 1 Peter as a significant reference point for its affirmation of nonresistance along with the plan of salvation.

\* \* \*

The preaching schedules of Abraham Doerksen, David M. Stoesz, and Cornelius G. Stoesz offer insight into Mennonite religious life in Manitoba and Mexico. The importance of evangelism in their sermons stands in contrast to assumptions about the conservative tradition of the Sommerfeld Church. The use of prayers of supplication from the Psalms and Prophets balanced emphases on new birth and discipleship. Preaching on the Second Coming during Advent reflects the influence of the Lutheran lectionary and points to a realized eschatology in which heaven and earth come together. As they travelled on their preaching circuits, the ministers also delivered sermons that linked nonresistance with salvation, in continuity with early Anabaptists.

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Donald Stoesz served for thirty-five years as a prison chaplain in Quebec and Alberta. His interest in Mennonite history began in 1975 when he and his brother, Dennis, translated part of Bishop David Stoesz's 1874 diary.

1 Donald Stoesz, *Canadian Prairie Mennonite Ministers' Use of Scripture: 1874–1977* (Victoria: Friesen Press, 2018), 119–120.

2 Stoesz, *Mennonite Ministers' Use of Scripture*, 137–39.

3 Stoesz, *Mennonite Ministers' Use of Scripture*, 169–71.

4 Peter Bergen, *History of the Sommerfeld Mennonite Church* (Altona, MB: Sommerfeld Mennonite Church, 2001), 69–77.

5 David M. Stoesz wrote 2,226 pages of text for sixty-four sermons. His sermons are located in the David Stoesz Family fonds, vols. 1561–63, Mennonite Heritage Archives (MHA), Winnipeg. Two of his sermons have been translated. The one he preached on New Year's Day, based on 1 Peter 1:22–23, appears in Stoesz, *Mennonite Minister's Use of Scripture*, 237–55, and is analyzed on pp. 197–201. The other is a Good Friday sermon based on John 19:28–30. It appears in Donald Stoesz, "Sermons and Service by Sommerfelder Stoeszes," David Stoesz Family fonds, vol. 5292, file 4, MHA.

6 Cornelius G. Stoesz wrote a total of 1,460 pages of text for fifty-nine sermons. His log book and several sermons can be found in the Cornelius G. Stoesz fonds, vols. 3273–75, MHA. Three of his sermons have been translated. A sermon based on 1 Peter 2:21 appears in Stoesz, *Mennonite Minister's Use of Scripture*, 257–68 and is analyzed on pp. 201–3. The other two are based on Philippians 4:4–7 and Luke 19:41–48, and can be found in Stoesz, "Sermons and Service by Sommerfelder Stoeszes." A partial list of Mennonite sermons that have been translated from the written Gothic German script appears in Stoesz, *Mennonite Minister's Use of Scripture*, 235.

7 Bergen, *History of the Sommerfeld Mennonite Church*, 68–77. Jake Peters obtained these records from Bishop Jack Doerksen in Mexico in 1982 and brought them back to Canada.

8 Stoesz, *Mennonite Ministers' Use of Scripture*, 153–68, 187–95.

9 Maps detailing the preaching circuits of Abraham Doerksen, David M. Stoesz, and Cornelius Stoesz appear in Donald Stoesz, *Mennonite Ministers' Use of Scripture*, 231–33.

10 About 14 per cent of the ministers' sermon texts were based on Scripture passages emphasizing evangelism; these sermons were used in 18.6 per cent of their preaching. Stoesz, *Mennonite Ministers' Use of Scripture*, 186.

11 Bergen, *History of the Sommerfeld Mennonite Church*, 10–11, 44–46, 49–51.

12 Stoesz, *Mennonite Ministers' Use of Scripture*, 28.

13 *Search for Renewal: The Story of the Rudnerweider/Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference, 1937–1987* (Winnipeg: Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference, 1987), 39–41.

14 *Search for Renewal*, 41.

15 *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, "Evangelism."

16 Stoesz, *Mennonite Ministers' Use of Scripture*, 16–17.

17 Stoesz, *Mennonite Ministers' Use of Scripture*, 186.

18 Stoesz, *Mennonite Ministers' Use of Scripture*, 39–49.

19 Stoesz, *Mennonite Ministers' Use of Scripture*, 209–21.

20 Stoesz, *Mennonite Ministers' Use of Scripture*, 100.

21 Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church*, vol. 3, *The Medieval Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 183. See also Old's comments about Pope Gregory's Ezekiel sermons and choice of Gospels for Advent in *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church*, vol. 2, *The Patristic Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 436–40.

22 The Amish lectionary, which is based on the Reformed *lectio continua* practice of reading Scripture during worship, also includes *Weltende* passages such as Matthew 24 and 25 as Scripture readings just before Christmas. Stoesz, *Mennonite Ministers' Use of Scripture*, 69. Old explains the difference between the *lectio selecta* practice of Scripture reading used in the Lutheran tradition and the *lectio continua* of the Reformed tradition. Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church*, vol. 4, *The Age of the Reformation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 27–31, 153.

23 Erland Waltner, "Preface to 1 Peter," in *1–2 Peter, Jude*, Believers Church Bible Commentary, by Erland Waltner and J. Daryl Charles (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1999), 15.

24 Waltner, "1 Peter," in Waltner and Charles, *1–2 Peter, Jude*, 107–9.

25 C. Arnold Snyder, ed., *Biblical Concordance of the Swiss Brethren, 1540*, trans. Gilbert Fast and Galen A. Peters (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2001), 8.

# BUT NOT MANITOBA

## One Delegate's Impressions

Ernest N. Braun

A while ago, my friend Blake Hamm and I were discussing the twelve delegates (ten Mennonites, two Hutterites) who visited Manitoba in June 1873. Some of them kept journals that were later published. We noticed that we had not seen any published journals by Wilhelm Ewert, a minister from West Prussia, or from Jacob Buller, also a minister, from the village of Alexanderwohl in the Molotschna colony. Why was there nothing from them? A quick email to John Thiesen at the Mennonite Library and Archives at Bethel College revealed a cache of untranscribed documents, totalling 116 scanned images, most of which were letters these two delegates had written to their families. Of course, these letters were in German, and in what we refer to as Gothic cursive – chicken scratches. Blake found software to do the rough transcription, and I edited that. A hundred-plus hours later, all the documents were transcribed and translated into English.

What turned up was interesting. As we know, starting in 1873 and continuing into the 1880s, most of the Mennonite emigrants from imperial Russia ended up in the United States. It was intriguing to read the impressions Ewert and Buller shared with their families and churches back home. I will focus my remarks here on Ewert and his comments about Manitoba. Our translations of Ewert's first three letters to his family follow this article.

\* \* \*

In his second letter written to his family from Fargo, after spending time touring in the Dakotas, Ewert had already seen enough to report the following:

After everything I've seen and heard, I have concluded that we can't look for anything better than this area. Where there is more timber, it will either be farther away from populated areas or the land will no longer be available in large blocks.

The first hint of Ewert's opinion of Manitoba appears in his description of the voyage down the Red River from

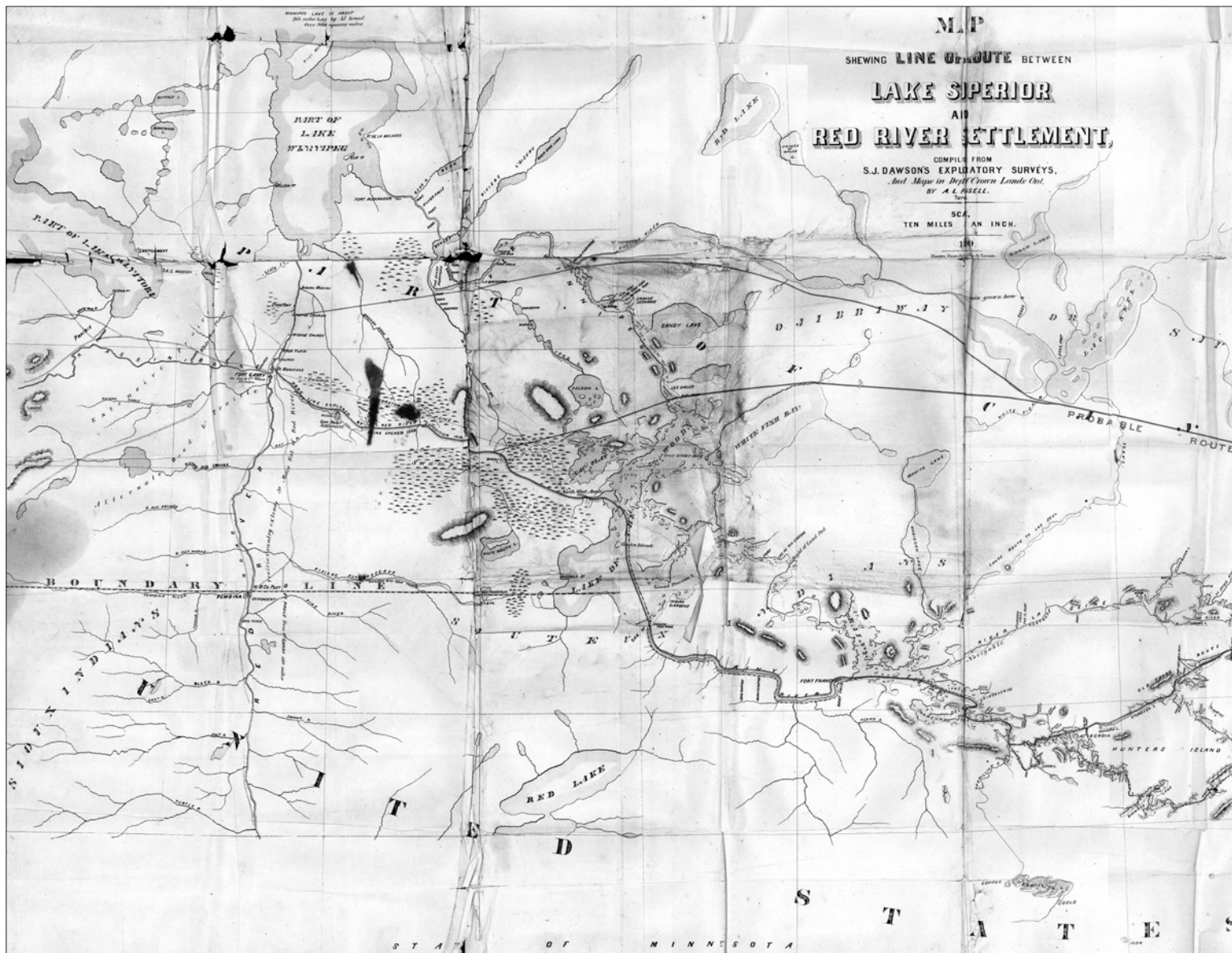
Moorhead, Minnesota, to Fort Garry, Manitoba, on the steamboat *International*:

The trip went quite well so far, but it was immediately apparent that we were no longer under American stewardship. On the Canadian boat we greatly missed the unassuming, courteous treatment one experiences in America, from the waiter to the president, and although we paid well, the food was very poor.<sup>1</sup>



MENNONITE LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES, BETHEL COLLEGE, 2003-0140

Wilhelm Ewert, one of the delegates to North America in 1873, wrote letters back to Germany describing Manitoba.



Ewert poured scorn on the Canadian offer to transport the Mennonites via the Dawson route.

Then he gives himself away a little, when he describes the group's reception by Lieutenant-Governor Alexander Morris in Winnipeg:

There we were greeted with great friendliness, served champagne and biscuits, and the advantages of the country were presented to us. Since I was already biased against this country from the inquiries I had made previously, my acquaintance with its population aroused even more antipathy towards it, and I paid very little attention to the pretenses and flattery offered to us.

While at Government House, the Manitoba officials emphasized that the eight townships of land they were offering would be free of charge and were entirely reserved for the Mennonites. Ewert points out that was not accurate, since the Hudson's Bay Company was entitled to nearly two sections per township, and that other land was restricted by existing Métis river lots. When he later reported on his impressions gleaned in Manitoba, Ewert

referenced the Red River Resistance and Métis struggles against the government, concluding that many of the Métis had simply given up and left. He also referenced Treaty 1 and questioned whether the government would be able to keep the promises made in it. He observed, moreover, that a large immigrant settlement would drive the bison away, predicting that this would adversely affect the Indigenous people who depended on it, and would radically change the dynamics between them and European settlers.

It seems to have been a fairly lively meeting, with Manitoba officials offering advantages, and Ewert shooting them all down. Here are five examples:

1. **Canada will provide transportation from the Black Sea to Winnipeg for \$55 using the all-Canadian route via the Dawson Trail.** Ewert pours scorn on the Canadian offer to transport the Mennonites via the Dawson route, pointing out that everything would have "to be unloaded from the wagon onto the boat and vice versa about twenty-six times," noting that this alone would



was projected to run 40 miles from the settlement and would cost roughly \$150 million, for which the necessary cash was still lacking.”

5. Manitoba will have an abundance of heating material since vast supplies of coal have been discovered nearby for fuel and for export in exchange for building materials from the United States, creating great prosperity for Manitoba. The earliest verifiable coal deposits in Manitoba were discovered in 1879, so any claim of huge coal deposits in 1873 was, at the very least, not based on fact. Ewert describes how through inquires made after the meeting, “We learned that the report of the coal discovery was a ruse, that the journey on the Dawson route was life-threatening, [and] that the reason that no grain was cultivated is that the grasshoppers often destroyed it.” He remarks, “All this information led me to conclude that we must really be considered to be very stupid.”

He goes on to draw another contrast between the US and Manitoba, regarding alcohol: “Throughout America, I had encountered lively, civilized activity, for there are entire states where no spirits may be served. At many railway stations you cannot even get beer in the restaurants. . . . In Manitoba, however, old and young, . . . [all] cavort in the drinking dens, bickering, gambling, and fighting.”

#### TOUR OF THE EAST RESERVE

Ewert came to his conclusion about settlement in Manitoba before he and the other delegates had even visited the townships of what would become the East Reserve, which he relates in detail. After overnighing at the Davis Hotel, and after the delegates were photographed in front of the Dominion Lands Office, the trek began. Ewert sarcastically implies nefarious motives for the provisions officials loaded for the trip: “eight barrels of schnapps and wine were taken, but to the chagrin of the gentlemen we made little use of them.”

Ewert remarks that before they even got to “the homeland chosen for us,” “we got stuck in the swamps about ten times and had to pull out first the horses and then the wagons,” with diplomats, ministers, and drivers all putting their shoulders to the wheel.

Upon arriving at Pointe-des-Chênes (Ste. Anne) Ewert was unimpressed that “a government building, . . . set up to accommodate emigrants, was not opened to admit us, so we were forced to pitch our tents in the mud and rain.” It was only the kindness of the caretaker of the adjacent Hudson’s Bay Company post that saved them from the rain.

Ewert was also unimpressed that the wagons carrying the food got lost that first day, and only arrived past noon the next, so they made a short day of it, finally getting to the boundary marker, and seeing the reserved land. He saw a water table so high that dugouts were brimful of water, boulders abounding everywhere, and a woodland of aspens “the thickest of which were not more than eight inches in diameter, which could not be reached at all in summer because they stood in a bog.”

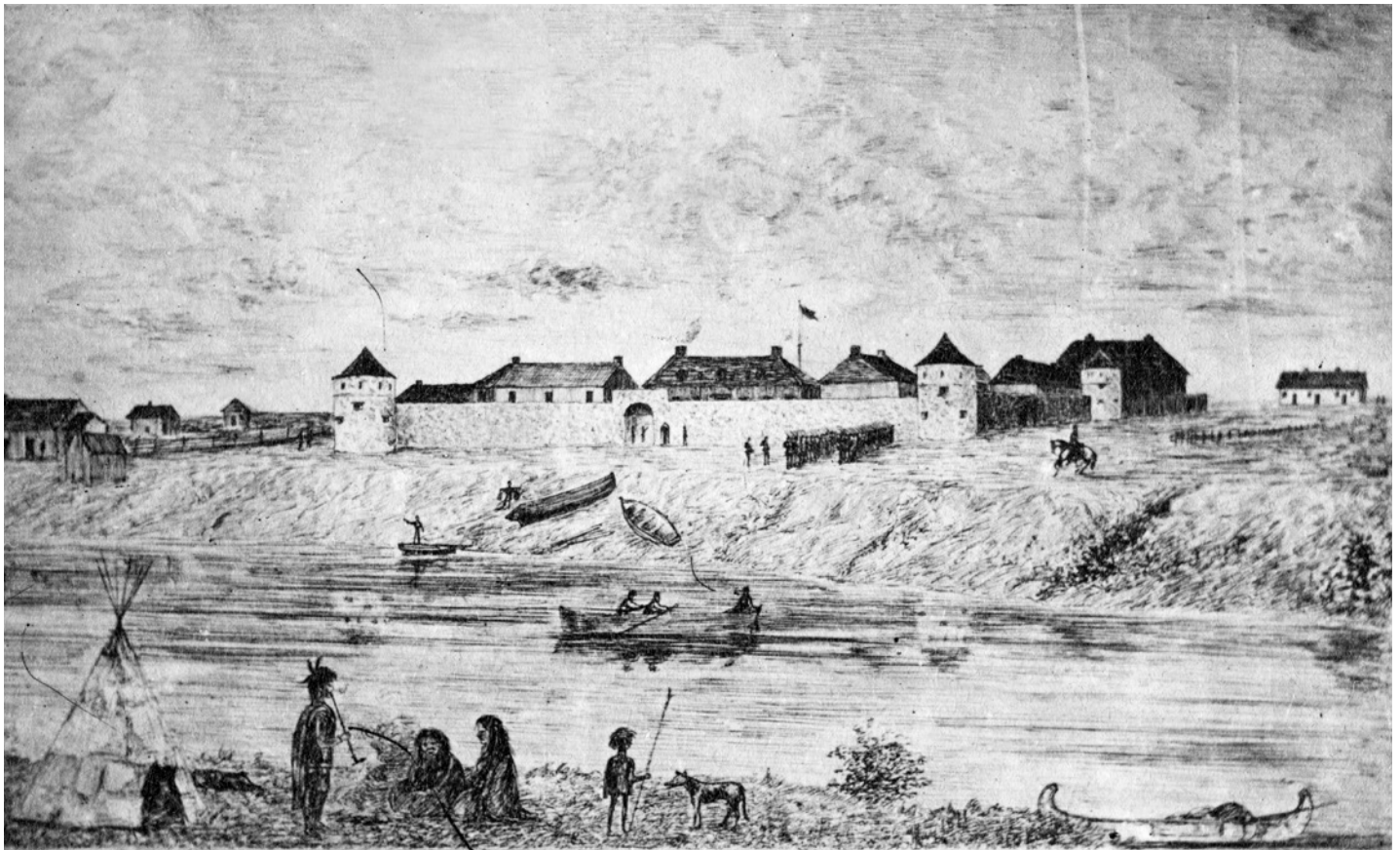
The second night, celebrated with hymns around the camp-

add at least four weeks to the six-week journey, almost doubling its length, and arguing that, in comparison, Fargo, Dakota Territory, was only three days from New York by train.

2. But look at the market potential: “Manitoba was considered to have a great advantage because all products here are more expensive than in the United States.” He responds, sure, but those prices will only continue until the Mennonites out-produce the small Manitoba market – “the products would be worthless in the future.”

3. Oh, but Mennonites can export their surplus products “up the Red River” (to the United States). Ewert counters, yes, but “the shipping company gets paid up to 1.5 cents per pound of freight [to Fargo], which is exactly as much as wheat is worth here.”

4. Manitoba will not depend on shipping companies because a railway to the Pacific is coming. Ewert gives this no credence at all, saying, “We were then led into thinking that the intention was to build a railway from the Atlantic to the Pacific, which



When Ewert arrived in Winnipeg in June 1873, he found the idea of Mennonite settlement in Manitoba to be far-fetched. CITY OF WINNIPEG ARCHIVES, I03456

fire, was uneventful. The next day they met some settlers at Clear Springs, whom he describes as having “chosen nice places and [who] were lured here as victims of unscrupulous agents – in isolation, cut off from all traffic.” Bertha Mack was able to converse with the delegates in German and encouraged them to settle nearby. The next stretch south, however, was a nightmare of swamp and impassable coulees filled with water, forcing them to chase the horses across and pull the wagons through with the reins, with everybody pushing. That was merely the prelude to a night all the delegate narratives mention:

But here I endured a plague like almost never before in my life. Because it was muggy and rainy, the mosquitoes were so blood-thirsty that one suffered terribly from their bites. There was no thought of sleeping, and I spent the night smoking the tents of my travelling companions, using a frying pan filled with hot coals and fresh grass, to drive the mosquitoes out of them, so that those who were less sensitive than I could at least get some sleep. I wrung my hands in desperation and whimpered in pain. In the morning, everyone had swollen faces and hands from the mosquito bites.

The next morning, Saturday, June 21, Ewert and five others decided enough was enough, and went back to Winnipeg the shortest way, which was via the Crow Wing Trail. In Winnipeg, happily reunited with the American railway agent Hiller, Ewert and the five delegates immediately boarded the steamship for

Fargo, from which he wrote his conclusion: “For the reasons given, to which a great many drawbacks can be added, I consider it quite impossible to set up a settlement here.” But not all agreed: “Some of the deputies, however, seemed to have no eyes, ears, or feelings for all this, but rather their approval and willingness to lead their people into this wasteland.”

While we may marvel at Ewert’s understanding of the Manitoba situation, there is an irony in his conviction that a successful Mennonite settlement in Manitoba – particularly on the East Reserve – was not possible. His sons Heinrich and Benjamin would spend a good part of their professional lives in Manitoba, Heinrich heading up the school in Gretna that became the Mennonite Collegiate Institute. Manitoba now has one of the largest concentrations of Mennonites from imperial Russia/Soviet Union in the world. The Rural Municipality of Hanover, corresponding roughly with the East Reserve, has had the highest per capita rate of charitable donations in Canada for the last generation at least. Despite Ewert’s judgment, seven thousand Mennonites arrived in Manitoba in the 1870s, where they would survive and eventually thrive.

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Ernest N. Braun is a retired educator and resides with his wife Doreen in Niverville, Manitoba. He devotes his time to researching and writing on topics of local Mennonite history and is co-editor of *The Historical Atlas of the East Reserve* (2015).

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<sup>1</sup> Most quotations are taken from a published version of Ewert’s June 29, 1873, letter from Fargo, Dakota Territory, printed in *Der Mitarbeiter* in October 1929 and reprinted in *Die Mennonitische Rundschau*. It was published again in the Jan. 4, 1939, issue of *Der Bote*.

# LETTERS FROM A DELEGATE'S JOURNEY

Wilhelm Ewert

Transcription by Blake Hamm, translation by Ernest N. Braun

**Aboard the *Frisia* on the French coast near Le Havre, May 16, 1873.**

Beloved wife and children,

The *Frisia* is at anchor here and won't sail farther until tomorrow afternoon, so we have a lot of time and the opportunity to send you letters. I want to use this time to tell you how we've been doing so far, which hopefully will be very dear to you.

On the 14th [of May] at 8 a.m. we boarded the *Makinehe* near Hamburg, which by 12 p.m. took us to the *Frisia*, which lay anchored at the mouth of the Elbe. The sea was pretty choppy all day; the wind was west, i.e., against us; the signs of seasickness soon appeared in one and the other, especially in the passengers on the steerage deck who have their accommodations on the forward parts of the ship, which swayed much more than the middle of the ship where the cabin passengers are accommodated. Of our travelling party, only I and Brother Schrag have seasickness, but this ailment is not as bad as it is made out to be, unless it is more severe in stormy weather. A little dizziness and nausea causes vomiting, and then you feel better again for a while, and this repeated itself a few times from about 6 a.m. to 8 a.m., so that I couldn't eat supper, but as soon as you go to bed, all discomfort disappears and you could eat while lying down – but as soon as you lift your head the dizziness is back. In the morning I tried to get up, believing that all the nausea would disappear in the fresh air, but since I didn't find this confirmed, I went back to bed, and then drank coffee and some bouillon at lunchtime. But after lunch I went on deck and felt completely fine.

On the 15th we had beautiful weather all day, and almost complete calm; this soon enlivened all kinds of rowdiness so that even among the steerage passengers some began to make music and dance. The way of life on the ship is all celebrations, more enjoyable than at our wedding parties. In the morning at 8 a.m. the bell calls us to table. Then cutlets and potatoes will be passed around; rolls, butter, cheese, and sugar are on the table, which

everyone can take as they please, and then there is a cup of coffee with milk. At 10 a.m. the bell rings again, and then the table is again filled with buttered bread with cheese, sausage, tongue, and anchovies, and everyone can eat as they please. At lunchtime there is soup, and probably six other dishes – various roasts, fish, tropical fruits, etc.; in short, one can't think of anything better and finer. The service is very attentive and proper, and as soon as some of the dishes are gone, more is brought in, so that almost as much is taken from the table as was served. Coffee like in the morning. In the evening, tea, roasts, and a variety of cold dishes. Now the description of the ship: it is 390 feet long, 48 feet high, 37 feet wide, and the engine has 750 horsepower; the crew consists of 124 men. There is a doctor, midwife, a barber, two bakeries, and a pastry shop. The meat and milk are stored in the ice cellar and kept fresh. There are over 700 people travelling in steerage, 97 in the second-class cabin, and 18 in first-class cabin – one expects several more passengers to join the former cabin here.

In steerage, the single women are in a separate space; the single men are also separate and the families are also separate but together. The berths are little enclosures partitioned with boards, two of which are on top of each other, each intended for one or more people. They have to get their own food from the kitchen using their own dishes. Everyone gets half a pound of meat and vegetables, bread, and coffee or tea every day. The bed, that is mattresses and bedding, everyone has to bring with them. In addition to these sleeping areas, there is a larger space on the steerage deck in which they can stay and move freely. But my favourite place to stay is on deck when the weather is nice. There are quite decent people among them. But the cabin passengers have it much better, apart from the food.

There is a hall for one's free use, which is located in the middle of the ship and is 100 feet long and located on the second floor. This hall is 8 feet high and 16 feet wide; in the middle of it, the whole length of it, there is a table 4 feet wide, on each side a bench upholstered with velvet, and the hall is lit day and night with

eleven shaded lamps; at this table we eat together. The cabins are on each side of the hall. Our cabin is 11 feet long and 6 feet wide. There are two beds, one over the other, fitted onto each of the two broad sides, which are not very soft but are clean and comfortable. There is a tin can attached to each bed, into which the seasick person can vomit – and which the waiter cleans immediately. We get water for washing and our boots are cleaned. The travelling company is very decent and we soon became friends with one another. In an emergency, six people can be placed in a cabin, then two beds are also added to the long side; now there is



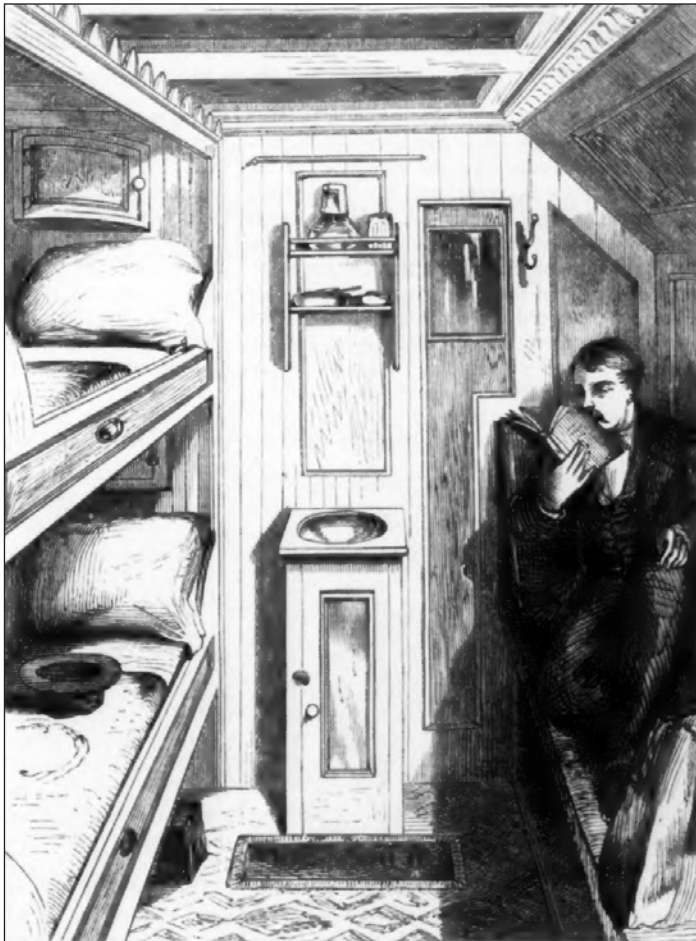
Writing to his wife, Ewert described the amenities of the ship, which included a doctor, a midwife, and bakeries.

HARPER'S NEW MONTHLY MAGAZINE 41, NO. 242 (1870): 187

a sofa on the long side because there are only four of us together. The passengers in the first-class cabins have their stay in the upper ship at the front, and probably in a way similar to ours, although everything is still much finer there than with us; the walls are covered with large mirrors, the pillars that support the ceiling have gold-plated capitals, etc. If everything goes very well, one reckons that we can be in New York from here in ten days, so since we don't leave here until tomorrow noon, you won't be able to receive a letter from me before a letter addressed on the 27th. During the journey up to here we saw no land on the North Sea other than in the straits of Calais, on the left side the coast of France and on the right the coast of England, where on one side Calais is visible and on other, Dover.

Well, thank God we are all very well; the brothers send their greetings. Johann [Funk, b. January 6, 1857, emigrated on the *Frisia* as a sixteen-year-old] also requests that you greet his parents. He will write from New York, because he can't very well write anything else other than what this letter already reports to you. Greet Brother Sudermann when he visits you and give him this letter to read. If you receive the dispatch of the *Frisia's* arrival in New York, then also report it immediately to Kozelitzke [village in West Prussia]. But write everything in detail, to the given address – what is happening at home, including whether the yearling is improving, how the grain is doing, in short, how everything is going, etc. May the gracious God bless you and protect you as well as ourselves; this is our daily prayer. Greetings to all friends, from me.

Your husband and father,  
W. Ewert



Ewert described the rooms on the ship as clean and comfortable, with a tin vomit can next to the bed.

HARPER'S NEW MONTHLY MAGAZINE 41, NO. 242 (1870): 193

### Fargo. Station of the Northern Pacific Railway on the Red River in the Territory of Dakota, June 12th, 1873.

Dear wife and children!

You have not yet received a letter from me in America, but I hope you will have received detailed news from Johann Funk of New York and Wadsworth, Ohio, and I wish that it gave you pleasure to learn from this that I am doing very well. Yes, thank God, today, too, I can delight you with the fact that all our undertakings are proceeding very successfully under the noticeable care and concern of our faithful and gracious God, and that we are all very healthy and that so far we enjoy a lovely unity. I want to continue my reports briefly up to where Johann [Funk] will hopefully have already shared the essentials.

When we arrived in New York [on May 29], we found a letter from the Russian deputies [Mennonite delegates from imperial Russia] who had already gone to America two months before us, saying that we should meet together in St. Paul, Minnesota, in the first week of June; and that means we have to hurry. Johann will have written that we deputies in New York separated, myself and Brother Schrag deciding to visit Mr. J. Cooke, the so-called Rothschild of America and partner in the company of the Northern Pacific Railway, the other brethren deciding to

visit the brethren in Canada [Ontario] and take along Brother Shantz from there as a guide for Manitoba. We arranged to meet in Elkhart by June 5th at the latest. We arrived there on the morning of that day, but the others weren't there yet. When they still didn't arrive in the afternoon on the four o'clock train, we continued travelling without them, as we had already telegraphed the brethren in St. Paul when we would arrive there. We spent the night in Chicago, and as we were having coffee in the morning, our dear travel companions also came in. The next train then took us all farther west. The journey to St. Paul took almost twenty-four hours on the railway; here we met the first three deputies [Sudermann, Buller, and Unruh]. Four other delegates from Russia from the Kleine Gemeinde and from the Hutterites, who had Brother John Funk from Elkhart as their leader, had, however, already hurried ahead again. So we too soon left there and came to Duluth on the 7th [Saturday] towards evening, on Lake Superior, a very nicely situated harbour town, which is only three years old and already numbers five thousand inhabitants, but when we saw ice drifts still in the harbour – driven by the north wind, which caused the air to be fairly cold, so that one could appreciate quite well that there was still heat on [in houses] – and [when] from St. Paul we travelled through only sandy, rocky, mountainous forest terrain, we almost felt like turning back. However, we stayed there on Sunday and left from there early Monday morning. We could very easily have had great misfortune along the way. Several days of rain had so softened the railway embankment, which was on a berm of quicksand, that the accumulated water had found a drain under the rails and had washed away the sand under the sleepers to a depth of perhaps two feet. This couldn't be detected from a distance, and when the train came to these places the rails bent down and this caused terrible jolts; the train engineer immediately recognized our situation correctly and used all his steam power to pull the train through with full force. When the train was over the bad spot and stopped, we looked at it and were able to assess the danger we had been in, because several rails were bent down over a foot and one was even broken. Such places were encountered several more times, but one was more cautious and the damage was repaired somewhat by workers travelling along before the train passed over them, for there was enough wood everywhere to provide underlay.

According to everything I have seen in America, it is astonishing how quickly industry develops here. The people are all very nice and friendly and modest. There is absolutely none of the insecurity that people in Europe talk about or imagine when speaking of Americans. I have seen no drunken person, no strife, no meanness nor crudity. It is said that the climate brings with it intelligent, alert being and communicates not only to all classes of the population but also to the livestock. For example, in the maze of carts and horse-drawn streetcars, you often see ladies driving with complete safety, because the horses are so clever that they know how to turn on their own. The horses and wagons are also on average more elegant than we are used to in Germany.

But the impression made upon me up to that point of what I

had seen in relation to the immigration of our co-religionists who wanted to farm in colonies was very unfavourable. The whole states of New York, Pennsylvania, Indiana, Ohio, Wisconsin, and also the greater part of Minnesota, which we drove through, offered, as far as the eye could see from the railway, no suitable place for settlement, because the country was either rocky and mountainous, or dense forest, mostly in swamp and sandy desert, or too varied, or just as expensive as near us [at home].

And since I noticed that every good piece of land had already been utilized very carefully, I felt very disappointed in my expectations. But when we got to the westernmost part of Minnesota, about 10 [20 is overwritten with 10] miles east of the Red River, there came a different world. Open prairie with a lovely variety of deciduous forests along the rivers and lush grass growth pleased the eye; only here and there did we notice the beginnings of a settlement. We took the train to Fargo where I am writing this [arriving June 9]. This city is two years old; it is not expanding to the same extent as Duluth because the hinterland is not yet populated, and so trade and industry do not yet have an area to make use of, but after a few years, because the railway has only just been completed here, this wonderful country will quickly be populated. Yesterday the 11th, I and five other deputies, with a government geometer [land surveyor] and our two tour guides, Hiller from J. Cooke & Company, and J. Funk from Elkhart, were driven overland on two wagons that belonged to the government and were used here for land surveys. We drove about 2½ [Prussian] miles [about 12 English miles] up the Red River, then across a very fertile plain for about 1½ miles to the Sheyenne River, which runs fairly parallel with the former and flows into the Red River below Fargo, then not far again along the Sheyenne River through the plain back to Fargo. People who worked on the railroad settled back and forth along the rivers and built log houses. We stopped in at one; it was an Englishman. The family consisted of two men, perhaps father and son, a young woman, an infant, and a young man. They have lived there for two years, and have fenced in a piece of about 4 *Morgen* [7 acres]; the cattle graze overall without fences. We learned from them that they had two cows and each would give twelve *Stoof* [almost ten litres] of milk at a time. The woman was very nice and hospitable. She offered a few bowls of milk, which was pure and rich, and the cream on it was completely yellow. We informed her that we would like to settle down with them, to which she said it was just so very cold there (as is well known, the last two winters here were among the coldest). We learned that from the 1st of May to November 15th the cattle feed outside, that corn, planted five days ago, was already two inches out of the ground, and potatoes planted three weeks ago were already hilled up. Apart from these few settlements, the entire area is overgrown with grass. The land, as far as we examined it, consists of a layer of black humus at the top up to about one or two feet, at places also deeper, and at the bottom the subsoil is about the same mixture as the best land here [at home], just a little more calcareous earth, but the land is almost too flat, and a few ditches may have to be created for drainage – but this is very possible because the two rivers are



Fifteen days after leaving Germany, Ewert arrived in New York City. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, LCCN 98508851

only 1½ miles away. The winter here is very snowy and there is a lot of water when it thaws, and since the water has no outlet, we found large stretches where cutgrass [*Leersia oryzoides*] grows, like that on our lake meadows, but without hair moss, and the water likely stands for a long time in the lowest places. Since it had rained heavily a few days ago, we drove entire stretches where the water was a foot deep, but everywhere the grass had grown high above the water. We thought that the soil perhaps had a layer of [impervious] clay, but since we were still easily able to poke a stick into the ground its entire length, we were convinced to the contrary and were further strengthened in this belief when people said that the entire field dries up in the summer, but that the heavy rain had caused the water to accumulate again. I believe that if in the dry season a ditch would be made in each such depression, which run about a thousand paces apart pretty parallel across the entire plain from one river to another, the water would collect and could be reserved for watering livestock during the dry season. Since experience shows that eastern Dakota very rarely has rain from mid-July to the beginning of September, this area must be the best there could be for establishing colonies, because the cattle will find food in the low places if the higher ones should become too dry. The rivers flow between banks, which were about twenty feet high at the present water level and should therefore never flood.

There is little timber on the banks of the rivers, but there is a sufficient supply of firewood and wood for making tools. There is oak, elm, willow, and poplar, and there are also willows for making hedges and weaving baskets. The Red River is about one

hundred paces wide, the Sheyenne River about thirty paces wide. The valley between these rivers is said to be 66 English miles of exactly the same nature, as the geometer assured us. The lumber, cut in all dimensions, is available by railway from Minnesota, and is not expensive: 1,000 square feet of one-inch boards cost 24 to 27 *Thaler*. The geometer assured us that when we settled on the railway, train stations would be built on our settlement as needed, because now at most stations there is just a post where the switches are, or a water reservoir. Why build train stations when no people live here yet.

The day before yesterday, we were going to take the train to the Missouri River. On this river are the beginnings of a city [Bismarck?], and a military station, Fort Seward, is located on the James River a little over 100 English miles west of here, not very far from where the railway crosses the Missouri. [The party decided to turn back at the James; they would have crossed the Sheyenne but did not reach the Missouri.] We saw several Indian tents there, but these people don't seem to be wild at all. They are poorly clothed, have cattle, horses, and wagons; everything is pitiful, but I think that they are almost on the same level of education as the residents of Wygoda and Koperno.

Yesterday evening we visited a farmer near here, an American. In a very friendly way, he showed us around his farm, which he settled three years ago. He had fenced in about 15 Morgen [about 26 acres], which he had planted very neatly. He had planted all types of fruit, corn, beans, peas, beets, onions, about a Culmer Morgen [1.4 acres] sown in rows, cabbage, potatoes, watermelon, melons, and, as an experiment, probably six varieties of wheat.

Everything had already sprouted; the corn, for example, planted twenty-two days ago was already ten inches high. He had a prairie plow, which could also be used to plow everything else, which with a steel coulter and mouldboard, very strongly built, costs 29 Thaler (smaller ones cost 18 Thaler), a Gehr [brand name?] double-disk seeding machine at 12 Thaler, a mowing machine, a good work wagon with accessories for hauling hay costing 100 Thaler, and so on.

The inn in which we are staying was built last fall; the front is 150 feet long and it has two wings at the back, each about 90 feet long, a long annex. Everything is two stories high and along the entire length of the house is a balcony about 14 feet wide, which is used entirely for the veranda. It has cladding on the outside and is plastered on the inside, which the Americans do so exactly that it almost looks like a wall of figures.

I have only said this so that you can see how skilfully and quickly the Americans build. Whoever has money, for them settling here is no problem at all. A house for 600–800 Thaler offers space for the largest family, because such buildings are built here with raised eaves so that there is a nice space for sleeping upstairs.

Well, my dears, up until now we have imagined that when you are across the ocean, you will have reached your new home; but it's still a long way till there. We have travelled at least 1,800 English miles to this point, and the straightest route will be about 1,600 miles, which you still have to cover in America, requiring at least four times twenty-four hours. Therefore, it is very wise if you don't bring a lot of things here because most of them are not more expensive here, but all of them are better than in Germany – e.g., cotton things are cheaper and much better than in Germany. As a rule, bed covers are made of calico, which is said to be almost indestructible, and costs about 6½ silver *Groschen* for 45 inches at three feet wide. They even make the finest shirts from white calico, and although there are very few shirts here and they are therefore washed very often (the Americans are very clean), they should still last at least four years.

We waited for the steamboat today and will go up the Red River to Manitoba (400 English miles), in order to look at the land there, too; that will take about three weeks. Then we will come back to this country to carry out a detailed examination of the entire area, which will take about another eight days. Then we want to travel to southern Minnesota and Dakota, Nebraska, Iowa, Kansas, and maybe even Texas, so my absence will last no less than four months. After everything I've seen and heard, I have concluded that we can't look for anything better than this area. Where there is more timber, it will either be farther away from populated areas or the land will no longer be available in large blocks.

[*Vertical postscript in margin*] Here the adherents of the non-resistant churches number in the many hundreds of thousands and are amazed that this precious gospel of peace finds so few faithful believers in Europe.

Here is a very pleasant climate, just the way you like it, dear wife, a humid, warm air, but the sun is not scorching hot, a real growing weather, as they say. I wish our brethren at home were

decided and knew when they wanted to emigrate and would commission me to secure and save land, for it is just as I said, as soon as it is announced that a larger settlement will be formed, there will be thousands of them who take possession of the government land, which, as you know, always lies between the railway sections, and is given to people free of charge, so that in such an area the only thing left to buy is the railway land and thus we would live among a mixed population. We are assured that the railway land can be bought for an average of 3 Thaler per acre, and in between the same amount of land is designated as homesteads by the government, so the agricultural land costs an average of 1½ dollars. I just spoke to a German adventurer who has been living in this area for ten years. He confirms that the low land is the most valuable because it is fertile even in the driest time. But if we can't decide to secure land now, good land will still be available later, too, but farther from the railway.

Now, my dear ones, if only I could come home for twenty-four hours to see you and what you are doing, then God's beautiful nature, which delights our senses in so many different ways, would bestow a renewed attraction again. But the firm hope that the dear Lord will lead us safely to you keeps me cheerful. Have the children copy this letter often and send one to Brother J. Ewert in Dragass, one to Kozelitzke [West Prussia], one to Dirks in Targowek [a district in Warsaw], one to Brother H. Ewert in Russia, and one to Joh. Nickel in Hamberg in Russia.

Greetings to all our dear friends at home; do not forget us in your prayers. We remember our precious ones and our dear congregations every day. May the Lord bless you all, and strengthen everyone in the willingness to follow his word and example and, out of grateful love for him, to willingly bear his yoke and his cross in order to then be able to experience the truthfulness of all his promises of grace. Yes, I feel every day that the Lord is faithful and does what he promised. I can't receive letters from you until I return here from Manitoba, because from Elkhart they are supposed to forward them to us here. I would then wish to receive quite a few; until now I have not received any yet. Therefore, write often.

So I commit you to God. Pray for your husband and father,  
*W. Ewert*

[*Written below the signature*] Our travelling party and deputation consists of the following people. (1) L. Sudermann, Berdiansk, (2) Jacob Buller from Alexanderwohl, (3) C. Buhr, Bergthal, (4) H. Wiebe, Bergthal, (5) Peters, Bergthal, (6) Dav. Klaassen, Heuboden, (7) Corn. Toews, Heuboden, (8) Paul Tschetter and (9) Lor. Tschetter from Hutterthal, (10) Th. Unruh from Karolswalde, (11) Andr. Schrag from Kotosufka, and (12) I. As guides we have (1) Brother Shantz from Canada, (2) Brother J. F. Funk from Elkhark, (3) Mr. Hespeler from the Canadian government, and (4) Mr. Hiller from the Northern Pacific Railway Company on behalf of Jay Cooke & Company.

[*Vertical postscript in the margin*] What is dear grandmother doing? Ohm Unruh once dreamed that she had died. I wish her, too, the peace of God.

Published in *Der Mitarbeiter*, October 1929. Fargo, Dakota Territory, June 29, 1873.

Dear wife and children!

We, a part of the deputation, have just returned here from Manitoba under God's guidance, and I have received your two letters of May 19th and June 3rd. Ah, dear wife, if you knew how happy I was to receive such good news from home (I couldn't help but cry for joy) you would write quite often.

I hope you will receive my letter of the 12th of this month from here, and will therefore continue with my report where I ended then. Don't be impatient if I repeat what's in the first letter, because I didn't keep a copy of it and I don't know exactly what I wrote back then.

On the 13th we travelled from here down the river by the steamboat *Nationale* [*sic*] to Fort Garry, our twelve deputies – being curiously twelve, bringing to mind the number of the Lord's disciples – and four guides: Mr. Hiller, commissioned by the Northern Pacific Railway, brother J. F. Funk of Elkhart, brother Shantz of Canada, and Mr. Hespeler, agent for the Canadian government. This trip took four days and four nights, for it is 650 miles by water from here to Fort Garry, or the town of Winnipeg, which is nearby, while by land it is said to be only about 250 miles straight from here. But since the journey by land is more expensive and less comfortable and takes just as much time, as long as navigation is possible, one travels only by water. The trip went quite well so far, but it was immediately apparent that we were no longer under American stewardship. On the Canadian boat we greatly missed the unassuming, courteous treatment one experiences in America, from the waiter to the president, and although we paid well, the food was very poor. The trip costs \$18 per person including meals. But thank God, we arrived happily at the destination of our journey [Tuesday, June 17].

A request was forwarded to us that we visit the governor in Winnipeg. There we were greeted with great friendliness, served with champagne and biscuits, and the advantages of the country were presented to us. Since I was already biased against this country by the inquiries I had made previously, my acquaintance with its population aroused even more antipathy towards it, and

I paid very little attention to the pretenses and flattery offered to us. But I will add something here: the progress of industry was made clear to us by the example that two years ago 1,000 board feet would still have cost \$100, but now after two saw mills were erected the price fluctuates between \$35 and \$45, while the price here in Fargo is only \$20–\$25 and entire shiploads go from here to there.

Then it was strongly emphasized that eight townships of land had been reserved and would be given to Mennonite settlers free of charge. However, I already knew that in all of Manitoba, two sections of land, i.e., the eighteenth part in each township, belonged to Hudson's Bay by contract, and the rivers and the land 4 miles on each side are guaranteed to the Indians as property [likely referring to Métis land grants]. Since passage there [to Winnipeg] from Russia is cheap, they offered \$55 per person from the Black Sea to Winnipeg, but the so-called Dawson route was designated for the journey in America, about which I learned that one would have to be unloaded from the wagon onto the boat and vice versa about twenty-six times, and this tour can be completed at best in four weeks in addition to the sea journey, while one can get here [Fargo] in a straight line from New York by train in three days.

In terms of markets for products, Manitoba was considered to have a great advantage because all products here are more expensive than in the United States. In my estimation, this could only last as long as we have to buy them for our subsistence, because the population of 18,000, three-quarters of whom are Indians and mixed-bloods [Indigenous peoples], who do not buy or sell anything, who live only from hunting and are too lazy for any other work, contribute nothing to the commercial and trading population. Therefore, foodstuffs are obtained from the United States, and a Mennonite colony would soon produce to excess for these 4,000–5,000 souls, and since no other market can be made possible, the products would be worthless in the future. To this objection it was replied that sales up the Red River [to the United States] were also possible. But the shipping company gets paid 1½ cents per pound of freight up to here [Fargo], which is exactly as much as wheat is worth here. We were then led into thinking that the intention was to build a railway from the Atlantic to the Pacific, which was projected to run 40 miles from the settlement



and would cost roughly \$150 million, for which the necessary cash was still lacking.

We were also told that although there was a shortage of heating and building material, coal had been discovered about 200 miles from here, which could be sent up the Red River and the Northern Pacific Railway to St. Paul, and from the proceeds lumber could be obtained from the United States, so the country would soon flourish. All this information led me to conclude that we must really be considered to be very stupid. But everything is being tried to win us over to Manitoba, because the governor gets a salary of \$10,000 and the few tax-paying residents can no longer afford this in the long run.

Meanwhile, lured by the champagne, the government house had filled with several more people, who I took for domestic staff and servants, because it is not at all remarkable here when the servant clinks glasses with the master. But I learned that they were councillors and government ministers. The whole place didn't look very parliamentary either, for the torn wallpaper and the slovenliness suggested nothing like a governor's office. The contrast between the United States and Manitoba is even greater than that between Prussia and Poland. At the end of our conference, we toasted the Queen and were dismissed.

Mr. Hiller and I made efforts throughout the city to ascertain the conditions of the land. We learned that the report of the coal discovery was a ruse, that the journey on the Dawson route was life-threatening, that the reason that no grain was cultivated is that the grasshoppers often destroyed it, and finally, that typhoid fever was claiming many children, which too seemed credible because there were almost no children to be seen. The fault was attributed to bad water.

Throughout America, I had encountered lively, civilized activity, for there are entire states where no spirits may be served. At many railway stations you cannot even get beer in the restaurants because the companies do not allow it for moral reasons. In Manitoba, however, old and young, brown and yellow and white cavort in the drinking dens, bickering, gambling, and fighting. And the Indians in their primitive state, adorned with quaint ornaments according to their rank, who do their business here in Winnipeg by the hundreds, are not enticing neighbours either. Even if the Indian is not to be feared otherwise, his revenge knows

no bounds as soon as he knows he has been cheated. They have already revolted against the government here several times, and since the latter was too powerless, promises were made to them of which it is questionable whether they can be kept, so that for this reason alone, although there is a lot to be earned there by the industrious, those who are sensible have returned to the United States. I think that if a larger settlement were to be established here, the buffalo, shying away from civilization, would retreat farther into the wilderness, whereby the Indians, having their only occupation impaired, could easily seek compensation at the expense of the settlers. Then the Mennonites who want to settle there would have the opportunity to see nonresistant Christianity put to the test. We pray to God that he lead us not into temptation, so why then subject ourselves to temptation if it is not necessary?

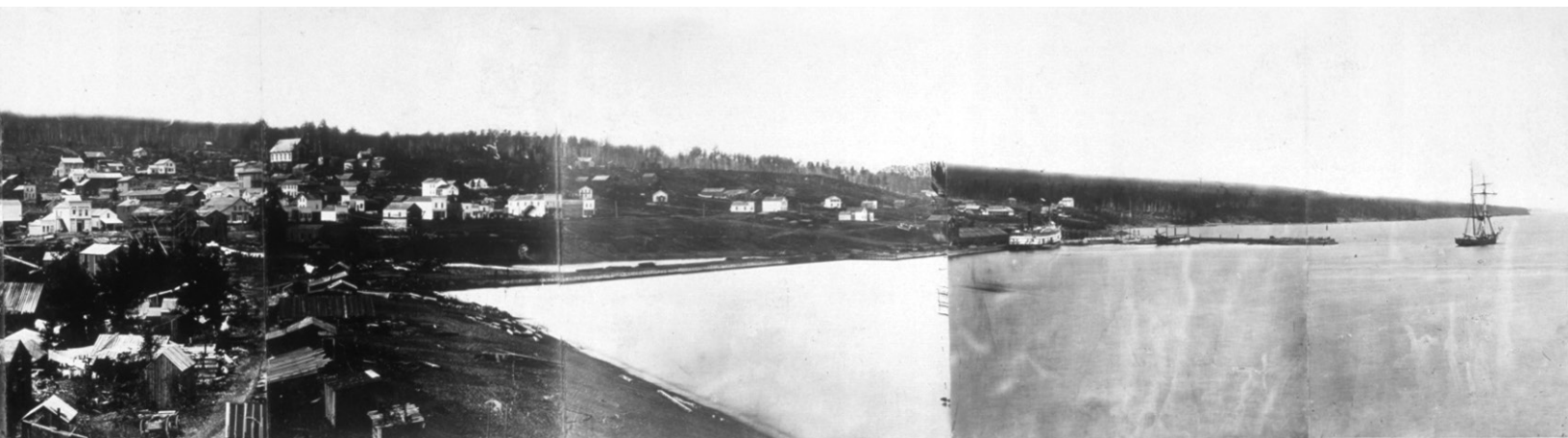
While Mr. Hiller and I went out to explore, the others, led by Mr. Hespeler and company, had gone out to the countryside to look at farms and had a lot to say about the fertility of the soil, but also that they had seen billions of locusts.

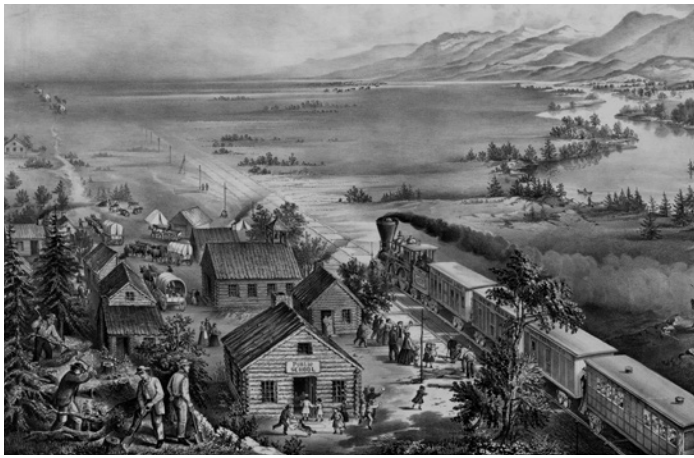
The next morning [Wednesday] was to be the inspection of the reserved lands. For this purpose, seven carriages were prepared, two with provisions and five for the conveyance of the passengers, whose number had increased to thirty people, although Mr. Hiller was not taken along, for the ministers and councillors were so interested in this expedition that they also wanted to be part of it. The supply wagons were sent ahead; the five passenger wagons had to drive in a group and a photographer had to photograph them. Then the procession started moving. But they had also very carefully allowed for inspiration, for eight barrels of schnapps and wine were taken, but to the chagrin of the gentlemen we made little use of them.

It would take too long to describe all the adventures and details of this journey, but suffice it to say that before we came to the reserved land, we got stuck in the swamps about ten times and had to pull out first the horses and then the wagons.

With the first day's journey we had not yet reached the homeland chosen for us. It was only in the dark of night that we arrived

As Ewert travelled across the American Midwest, he visited many newly settled towns, like Duluth, Minnesota. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, LCCN 2007662358





Ewert travelled by train, wagon, and steamboat through the interior of North America. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, LCCN 90708413

near a trading post belonging to the Hudson's Bay Company. A government building standing next to it, which was set up to accommodate immigrants, was not opened to admit us, so we were forced to pitch our tents in the mud and rain. Through the fire we lit, the caretaker of the trading post became aware of us, and most kindly offered us accommodation at his place. The next day we had to wait here until afternoon, for the supply wagons did not reach us sooner than that. Then we travelled a few more miles, until the boundary mound was pointed out to us where the promised lands began. A land where the water in the man-made ditches was level with the surface! We drove and walked around on it until evening and found some good spots. There was also woodland there, aspens, the thickest of which were not more than eight inches in diameter, which could not be reached at all in summer because they stood in a bog. We camped in our tents on a gently sloping elevation, on which were many boulders.

We were very fortunate, for the weather was fine, and our songs of praise, which brother Sudermann led from his rich repertoire, rang through the silent night up to the throne of God. The next morning we went on again. We also met some settlers who had chosen nice places and were lured here as victims of unscrupulous agents – in isolation, cut off from all traffic. We plodded along through the day until our advance apparently became impossible, for a meadow flooded with water obstructed our journey. But when we had struggled forward a stretch, we came to a ditch several rods wide. We tried to dam it up with mowed grass, but it floated away, and so we had to risk chasing the horses through and then pulling the carriages through on ropes, with the minister and coachman helping, and luckily we succeeded. We reached higher ground again, where we spent the night.

But here I endured a plague like almost never before in my life. Because it was muggy and rainy, the mosquitoes were so bloodthirsty that one suffered terribly from their bites. There was no thought of sleeping, and I spent the night smoking the tents of my travelling companions, using a frying pan filled with hot coals and fresh grass, to drive the mosquitoes out of them, so that those who were less sensitive than I could at least get some

sleep. I wrung my hands in desperation and whimpered in pain.

In the morning, everyone had swollen faces and hands from the mosquito bites. They wanted to take us around here longer, but since the new day was Saturday and we didn't want to spend Sunday travelling, and they also admitted that from this route one could not get to the other end of the land [the East Reserve] because of swamps and rivers, it was decided to return to Winnipeg, about 35 miles away, in order to take another tour on Monday to see the rest of the land, where there is also supposed to be better wood. Since I and several of the deputies had openly declared our opinion of this land, in order to requisition accordingly the necessary carts for the next week the question was asked as to which of us did not want to take part in a further reconnaissance. Therefore I, the two Tschetter brothers from Hutterthal, Brother Schrag, Brother Unruh, and Brother Funk stepped forward. We all arrived safely in Winnipeg in good time and I was delighted to meet Mr. Hiller there. Since a steamship left from there that same evening, the seven of us gladly used the opportunity to return here [Fargo]. For the reasons given, to which a great many drawbacks can be added, I consider it quite impossible to set up a settlement here [in Manitoba]. Some of the deputies, however, seemed to have no eyes, ears, or feelings for all this, but rather expressed their approval and willingness to lead their people into this wasteland. Should this happen, I could only conclude that God, in his gracious will, was providing for the light of the gospel to shine upon the poor Indians through them.

We had received a recommendation from the American consul [J. W. Taylor in Winnipeg] to inspect the lands around the Pembina River in Dakota near the Canadian border. For that purpose we received a four-horse carriage from Fort Pembina free of charge, and travelled around the area for three days [June 23–25]. We stayed with some settlers, very wealthy people. One is estimated to be worth \$80,000, while the other is said to own almost the entire town of Pembina. They were very accommodating and amiable, like almost every American. There is a lot of good land here, which extends with the same quality beyond the Canadian border. The river is suitable for mills in many places, and there is sufficient timber and firewood available for many years. In the forests there are oaks, elms, maples, ash, aspens, plum and cherry trees, wild grape vines, and many berry bushes and hazel bushes.

If we don't find anything similar farther south or closer to the railroad, I have nothing against settling here. We were assured of the fertility of the soil – e.g., onions grown from seed would be eighteen inches in circumference. Someone had cut up a potato and harvested 15 bushels from it; another was to have planted 2 bushels, not worked the land at all, and gotten 95 bushels. Wheat is said to bring 60 bushels per acre, etc. The grass and hay are said to be so tasty and nutritious that the horses, if they get such, spurn oats. The cattle were all well-larded and every cow gave a pail of milk. Millions of acres of this land are still available for free; indeed, we are being asked to settle here.

With heartfelt greetings, your loving husband and father,  
Wilhelm Ewert

— FROM THE ARCHIVES —

# ACROSS AMERICA

## A Russian Physician Visits the West Reserve

P. S. Alekseev



CITY OF WINNIPEG ARCHIVES, 101410

In the spring of 1887, Pyotr Alekseev, a doctor from imperial Russia travelling across America, arrived in Winnipeg to visit Mennonites in the West Reserve.

On May 27, 1887, we left Winnipeg for the south to inspect a colony of Mennonites, settlers from Russia.<sup>1</sup> The train was late. Instead of nine in the morning, we left the station at three o'clock in the afternoon. Spring floods in the hills near the Great Lakes (the train came from the east) affected train traffic here in the Prairies. Our route was straight south to the United States border through the stations of St. James, La Salle, Osborne, and Morris to the junction at Rosenfeld, and from there to Gretna, the main centre of the Mennonite colony. Around six

o'clock in the evening we arrived at our destination. As it turned out, we ended up in the place where we could most closely and most successfully get to know the colony. Around Gretna, the villages are arranged in a ring. Such villages are found only among settlers from Russia; in the rest of America, there are none. One only finds farms, hamlets, and isolated farm buildings. Farther south, there are Mennonite villages near the town of Emerson, which is still in Canada, and then also in the Dakota Territory. It is impossible to determine the present population because in

the colony there have been misunderstandings and disagreements among its members, and the elders have lost count of the colonists. Some are citizens of the United States, others enjoy special rights and privileges, and still others have been naturalized in Canada. I have had occasion to become acquainted with the older immigrants from Russia, who have been living here already for fifteen years.

Beyond the city of Winnipeg is a small forest of birch and willow. The vegetation rises above the grass and bushes because of the gullies and wet marshy areas between the rivers on which the city of Winnipeg lies. Farther, after travelling about ten miles, you will not come across a single tree or even a bush all the way to the border of the United States. It is all just steppe, bare steppe. The prairie here is real. Everything is covered with thick, green grass. Large areas have been plowed. Where the plows have opened the ground, rich, unctuous black soil is visible. It is well known that Russian settlers live in the most fertile part of the New World; there is no land in North America like that occupied by the Mennonites in parts of Manitoba and Dakota, and in Russia it can be found only in the provinces of New Russia [Novorossiia].

The ancestors of the Mennonites lived in Prussia. They received their name from a certain Simon Menno [Menno Simons], who spread the idea among his neighbours that there was no need to fight in war and, like [William] Penn, the founder of Pennsylvania, advised not to kill anyone, not to take up arms, even for self-defence. Enthusiastic about this impractical teach-

ing, Menno's fellow villagers left Prussia during the reign of Frederick the Great and prospered for a whole century in the south of Russia.

Everyone is familiar with the way of life of the German colonists, the good example they set for their neighbours, and their attachment to the land they worked so diligently. Their isolation and the absence of ritual in their religion do not dispose many in their favour. A strict family discipline, a simple way of life, useful customs and traditions, hard work, and thrift, sometimes expressed in stinginess, distinguished and still distinguish them from their neighbours, whether they live in Russia or Canada. They have no nationality because they are German by language and origin but they have adopted and observe many Russian customs and were born in Russia. In America, they are subjects of Queen Victoria but enjoy special privileges. They live peacefully among themselves and with their neighbours; they do not need police or judges. Bound by religious principles, they have their own ways of discipline, their own elected judges from among their elders. What they can be accused of is that they seem to be frozen in their customs and way of life, that they do not strive to get out of their rut, that the progress of the entire surrounding world does not concern them.

These people, whose main rule (not to insult each other, not to fight, not to kill) is so ideal, are rough in appearance. They do not strive for higher education, remaining honest, hard-working peasants, as their ancestors were a century ago. They are all lit-



The landscape of the Canadian Prairies reminded Alekseev of the fertile soil of southern Ukraine. MAID: MENNONITE HERITAGE ARCHIVES (MHA), 526-02-3.0

erate, but education does not go further than the village school even for the richest. They cannot even prepare teachers from among themselves; they get them from Germany or from the United States. Only a few are engaged in trade, and even then only in internal, home trade, so to speak; they keep goods only for their own people, their buyers are exclusively Mennonites. There are no wealthy individuals [*kulaks*] among them. Wealth is distributed evenly. Each one holds fast to his own property; the poor do not demand a share of the wealth of richer members. The community coffers are always full, from which they draw funds for institutions such as prayer houses and schools. The maintenance of these institutions is not regulated by a budget and is not constrained by economic considerations.

It is just as difficult to find out anything from the Mennonites regarding their religion, rules of private life, unwritten statutes, etc., as from the Russian schismatics. The Mennonites keep silent and believe that much should remain a secret and should not leave the inner circles of their community. I managed to learn that the mainspring driving their community is unconditional submission to the decisions of congregational meetings and the will of the elders. The main regulator of life, private and public, is thrift – frugality, and a contempt for luxury. Everything that hints at adornment, everything that is not essential for life but serves for convenience and pleasure, everything that is not simple and modest, is excluded from their lives. They are like monks in that they are not tempted by worldly pleasures, do not indulge in rev-

elry or games, but find reading divine books a pleasant pastime. Drunkenness does not exist among them, although they are not teetotallers (i.e., people who never drink alcoholic beverages).

We travelled from Winnipeg to Gretna in a train without classes. One small compartment in the middle car stood out for its dirty furnishings and spit-stained floor – it was designated for smokers. In the other compartments, we could not find any difference – the cars were all the same and the crowd of passengers was the same everywhere. There were no simple people and no Black people; all passengers were middle class. We noticed two clean-shaven men with serious, concentrated faces and at the same time a meek expression in their eyes. Their clothes were not distinguished in any way and were very worn; their hands were gnarled and calloused. They spoke only among themselves in a language, or rather a dialect, to which I had to listen for a long time to make out the meaning of their speech. They spoke Plattdeutsch.

At Morris Station the older of the two got off; he had the face of a man who fasted, his face expressing imperturbable calm and modest contentment; gentle eyes and resolute, narrow lips completed his characteristic physiognomy. It was evident that this was a man who had achieved something in life, who had power over himself and over others. As I learned later, this was one of the Mennonite elders: *Starosta* they call them, preserving the Russian word. He combines the role of head of one or several villages, judge, administrator, and pastor. Perhaps it was the



Alekseev and his wife travelled by train from Winnipeg to the town of Gretna. MAID: MHA, 163-1.0

*Kaiser* himself, of whom there are now two instead of one because of a split among the Mennonites. One of the passengers hinted to me that this man occupied the highest elected office. The others did not confirm this and remained silent when I asked about him. If, as is very likely, this was indeed the Kaiser, then, as befits a Mennonite who emphasizes simplicity, this person travelled without an entourage. On leaving the train carriage he got into a buggy, a kind of *tarantass* harnessed to a pair of magnificent horses, driven by a village boy.

Another of the Mennonites travelling with us began to speak with me in pure German. He remembers some of the Russian language, but after spending ten years in America, he has forgotten much of it. His language was more like Little Russian [Ukrainian] than the language of the interior provinces of Russia.



ARCHIVES OF MANITOBA

As he visited Mennonite villages, Alekseev studied their way of life.

He left Europe with his brother and father, now deceased. At present, he owns a plot of land that is smaller than what was given to the family when they migrated. The village assembly distributes evenly the amount of land depending on the number of workers. The community sees to it that the land does not go to waste and that everyone owns only what they can cultivate. Following Russian custom, women help with fieldwork, which is seen as a great wonder in America, where a woman knows nothing but housekeeping and, if she does anything outside the home, limits her activity to milking and looking after cattle. On large farms, however, the men always do the milking. Just as it would be surprising to see a Russian peasant man sitting at a spindle or spinning yarn, it would be equally surprising to see an American woman turning hay or putting sheaves on a cart. My companion could not praise his well-being and contentment enough; he said that it was as good and free here as in the Poltava province, where he was born and raised.<sup>2</sup> He grows wheat on forty acres; cattle breeding and a stud farm are flourishing for him.

He works exclusively with machines, some of which cost up to a thousand rubles. He runs the whole farm himself; he shoes the horses and repairs the machines. He was returning home, having sold a herd of cattle collected from his neighbours.

Around Gretna there are up to three thousand inhabitants in the villages, but there is no doctor due to the absence of diseases and epidemics. The doors are not locked, there are no guards or theft, fires are extremely rare, and there have been no mass deaths of cattle since the settlement of this area. I did not believe all this and attributed the rosy colours with which my companion painted the local situation to his mood after a successful sale of cattle and perhaps his pleasure at meeting a Russian. On the way back, however, I was convinced that all his accounts were true and not exaggerated. Visiting the Mennonite villages, I could but not admire the contentment of the inhabitants, the order that prevailed in them, and the healthy appearance of the population. Near the village of Altona, three miles before Gretna, my companion threw his baggage out of the window, intending to walk from the town to the village. He showed me his house; it was a real Little Russian cottage: the whitewashed walls had tiny windows, the roof was thatched with brush, and a wattle fence surrounded it; the well had a carrying pole.

\* \* \*

We got out of the train car and boarded the Queen's Hotel carriage, which had pulled up right next to the tracks. Not all stations have platforms, so you often step from the train car onto the carriage step. A girl about eleven years old in a wide-brimmed straw hat deftly ruled a pair of thoroughbred horses and took us to a two-storey house, a hotel kept by John Braun. This person, a local rich man and bigwig, was recommended to us in Winnipeg as a Russian, but he turned out to be a Swiss. He was known as "the Russian" because he dealt with immigrants from Russia. His hotel was second or third class. It had everything that is required of an American hotel, including a ladies' entrance, a bar, and a parlour with a piano, but everything was in the most pitiful, bad shape. There was no reason to complain about the dirt, but the cramped conditions and primitive household items proved to us that we were not in an American's house. Here, some things reminded us of Russia: a porcelain Easter egg hung from the ceiling as a ornament, portraits of the late Sovereign and of General [Mikhail] Skobelev hung on the walls, a Russian abacus was on the writing table, and old Russian dishes stood in the cupboard.

Gretna is a town with one unpaved street running along the railroad track. There are no stone buildings at all. Near the station are two huge elevators. The Mennonites drive up in pairs and dump their grain in one window, then go to the other and receive their payment. Grain is sold here for cash, without haggling. There are no concessions or special treatment for a good, regular customer; no promissory notes are written, and payment is not delayed. You only have to tip your sacks into one window and walk two steps to get money from the other. Grain is accepted at any time of the day and there are no refusals because too much

grain has accumulated. The grain prices for all North America are determined twice a day on the Chicago exchange and telegraphed to each elevator. The prices are posted in a prominent place on the wall immediately upon receipt of the dispatch. You can sell your grain silently, without wasting a single word, without cursing, without taking the Lord's name in vain, without trickery, without demands, and without wasting time. All Mennonites receive the newspapers and, taking into account current prices, take their goods to the elevator or keep them until a favourable time. The elevator is, in a sense, a monopoly; but because it belongs to many competing companies, strikes and artificial price changes are rare.

I spent the evening walking along the railway line. Here, at 49° north, parallel to Poltava, the May evening was fresh and the vegetation had not yet fully blossomed; the oaks were barely

In the morning the owner took us to see the surrounding villages of Rosenfeld, Altona, Blumenthal, Schöna, Lilienthal,<sup>3</sup> Schönthal, and other "thals" [valleys], although there are no mountains or valleys here, and the names are more like a memory of the homeland. I would call these villages Rovnaia [flat], Ploskaia [flat], Dalnaia [distant], Lugovaia [meadow], etc., on the basis that there is so much here that resembles Russia. German names also adorn the signs in Gretna: Adam and Esau, Pritzlau, Fobel. We were driving through the real New Russian steppe as if we had suddenly been transported to the province of Kherson: the black dust of the road, smoothly rolled, without ruts like we have in the south, the curves and turns of the road as they are only found in Russia. Here one could not see straight lines crossing at right angles like all the transportation routes in



A view of Gretna taken from one of its two grain elevators, which impressed Alekseev for their efficient operation.

green. The line of the border is marked by pits, but there is no border guard cordon. A customs official lives at the station, inspecting the baggage of passengers and the goods arriving from the States. A wide field of steppe plains is open to smuggling.

During the walk I asked questions of my Swiss companion, who, being an old-timer (he has been here since the founding of Gretna – about twenty years), had a true understanding of colonization and could impartially judge the way of life of the Mennonites, who had all arrived during his time. He did not understand everything regarding the internal affairs of the colony and its organization. He could not give precise information about the unwritten rules and laws, passed down orally from generation to generation, by which everything is kept in order in this flourishing society.

In the hotel, we fell asleep with the window open in a stuffy, cramped room. The clean, fresh air of the steppes could not suppress the smell of wine rising from the bar below, where they made noise late into the night.

America. All around to the horizon, the arable land was black and the meadows were green. Villages stood five or six versts from each other, which was also a peculiarity for the landscape in America.<sup>4</sup> Villages here consisted of ten to twenty-four yards, all cottages with thatched roofs. Only schools and prayer houses have roofs with shingles. They heat only with straw, as there is no wood for fuel at all and building materials are very expensive. The Mennonites have recently begun to move out of the villages and establish separate farms, in order to be closer to their fields.

The four of us travelled together; in the front seat next to John Braun there was a well-dressed person who spoke pure English and interfered in our conversation. The Swiss spoke German. We rode without hurrying, at a light trot, because despite the morning hours the soaring sun's heat was making itself felt in this area where there was no trace of shade. The left wheel began to creak. We changed seats to lighten the left side of the buggy, and rode at a walking pace, but the creaking grew louder, and the wheel stopped turning. Moving carefully along the smooth

steppe, we reached the village of Schönau. Several men with German features, clean-shaven and simply but neatly dressed, came out of the cottages. They wore Russian-style boots and caps. These two pieces of clothing are not found anywhere in America except in this region. The women wore dresses and kerchiefs like our women. The children ran around barefoot. In America, this is a great rarity. The crowd began to pull off the wheel, the hub of which was already smoking; they doused the axle with

water. The American and the Swiss were very surprised to be offered salted cow's butter for lubrication – for them this Russian method of lubrication was new and unknown; they could not understand that a dairy product is cheaper in the villages than store-bought wheel grease. There is little tar in America. Fishing, especially whaling, and the slaughter of livestock for meat delivery to Europe provide large supplies of lubricants, not to mention kerosene and its products.



While they were busy around the buggy, we entered the nearest house. On the threshold, my wife saw a copper dish, which she recognized undoubtedly as a piece of Russian craftsmanship. According to the hostess, this copper basin had indeed been brought from Russia; it had belonged to the family back in the Samara province and had been serving them for two decades.<sup>5</sup> In America, one cannot find anything so durable and convenient, either in material or form – in the States and Canada, all such



goods are made from tin. The floor at the entrance of the house was earthen. In the living room there was a real Russian stove. The furniture was remarkably simple, homemade. Everything was clean in a German or even Dutch way. On the walls hung Russian sheepskin coats, essential clothing during the harsh local winters and an object of envy for Americans. All of the furnishings were Russian; the only things missing were icons and a samovar. The Mennonites drink coffee and, although they are familiar with the advantages of a samovar, they are unable to use one due to a lack of charcoal or kindling.

When we set out, they shouted to us, “Good luck!” It was impossible to have a real Russian conversation; only the old men remembered a few things, greeting us and saying goodbye in Russian. When they learned my rank, they knew how to use the appropriate title, but they conversed with us in German. Those who were younger and the children did not understand Russian at all. In another village, we visited a wealthy house, blessed with many children. Only the father had left Russia; the other ten members of his family had seen nothing but the far west prairie. The cottage was spacious; there was a stove with a sleeping bench, and on the table lay a Russian abacus next to a German newspaper published in the state of Illinois.<sup>6</sup>

Calico is worn much less in America than in Europe; here the patterns on the dresses of women and children are the same as those produced in the calico factories of Serpukhov or Ivanovo for the southern provinces. The Mennonites are conservative in appearance and do not change their tastes. In Winnipeg there are warehouses where they keep goods for them, which are printed in England in imitation of Russian designs. The same is true of headscarves. Only here in all of America can you see the streaked patterns, bean-shaped motifs, and colours that the eye has become accustomed to in Russia.

The cattle yard was covered, which is not found on English or American farms. Milk was served to us in a glazed pot, not in a pitcher as is always the case across the Atlantic Ocean. Even the outside thermometer was in Réaumur, not in Fahrenheit. The owner, who had lived here for fifteen years, still could not break the habit of the Russian scale and kept his weather journal in the same way as in Russia. He showed me his record of frosts and informed me that meteorological observations were very important to him; he compares the local climate with the climate of Samara province and sends tables with temperatures to his relatives to give them an idea of the climate of Manitoba.

The garden near this house is considered the most luxurious among the Mennonites, but in fact it is pitiful. All attempts to grow apple trees fail; severe frosts destroy all fruit trees. There are many gardening enthusiasts here, but their efforts are not crowned with success. For some reason, plums somehow still withstand the climate and sometimes even ripen. Gooseberries and currants grow successfully and are the only fruits that the locals enjoy. Gardening and vegetable growing are the weakest

Gretna's Queen's Hotel, owned by John Braun, who was known as “the Russian.” WINNIPEG PUBLIC LIBRARY, ROB MCINNES POSTCARD COLLECTION, MN0862



Residence of Heinrich H. Ewert, who moved to Gretna in 1891 to become principal of the Mennonite Educational Institute . MAID: MHA, PP-PHOTO COLL. 166-296.0

aspects of Mennonite farming – the main focus is cattle breeding, horse breeding, and wheat. Here wheat reigns; everything depends on it. Wheat commands the prizes – it determines the prices for everything, and the balance of the year depends on its harvest. So far, there have been no hailstorms, locusts, or mass deaths of livestock. There are gophers, but not on Mennonite land; they are much farther west in the countryside where there is still little plowed land. Here, people only know about the Hessian fly through the newspapers.

We spent the whole day travelling through the villages. In some places, the grass was already tall, despite the early time of year, and provided excellent fodder for the cattle – large herds grazed in the meadows. The cattle must have been brought from Texas – they resembled South American cattle. Everywhere the horses were thoroughbred; some resembled those from stud farms and were similar in build to those from our southern provinces. Between villages, human-made, properly planned roads were built. The communities are obliged to build routes of transportation and annually increase the number of versts (here they count not in miles, but in versts), gradually expanding the network of roadways throughout the colony. In one place you can see how trenches are being dug; in another, gravel has already been laid. Some villages are connected by the same excellent roads as those you would find between villages in England and America.

It seems to me that exclusiveness, extremity, and originality – bordering perhaps on holy foolishness – are needlessly considered reprehensible by many. Mennonites are undoubtedly a one-sided people, carried away by their beliefs. Nevertheless, wherever they appear, like the Puritans, total-abstainers, and other exceptional people who have broken off contact and communication with their contemporaries, they have a beneficial influence on others, serve as a good example to their neighbours, and contribute their part to the general progress of the world. They are silent companions, invisible workers, useful labourers in the cause of spreading morality and improving people.

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Born into a merchant family in Moscow, Pyotr Semyonovich Alekseev (1849–1913) was a physician and writer dedicated to public health and social reform. He travelled extensively, visiting North America, China, and Japan.

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1 Excerpted in translation from P. S. Alekseev, *Po Amerike: Poezdka v Kanadu i Soedinennyye Shtaty* [Across America: A trip to Canada and the United States] (Moscow: A. Lang, 1888), 290–300. Thanks to James Urry for submitting this source.

2 During the migration to imperial Russia in the early nineteenth century, some artisans may have settled in the province of Poltava. However, a Mennonite settlement in that province did not exist.

3 Perhaps he is referring to Grünthal.

4 One verst equals approximately one kilometre.

5 A migration from Prussia to Samara province took place during the mid-1850–1870s. It is unclear how many Mennonites from here moved to Manitoba.

6 Likely a reference to *Die Mennonitische Rundschau*, although it was published in Indiana.

# MENNONITES MIGRATING TO BELIZE

## A British Perspective

The migration of Mennonites from Mexico to the colony of British Honduras (now Belize) began in the 1950s. Driven in part by a desire to preserve their religious and cultural autonomy, several Mennonite communities sought a new homeland where they could maintain their traditional lifestyle, language, and agricultural practices. The following letters from The National Archives of the UK show the dialogues between the Development Commissioner in Belize and colonial officials in London and Ottawa, and between British consular officials in Mexico, about the possibility of Mennonite migration.<sup>1</sup>

\* \* \*

Colonial Secretary's Office, Belize

August, 1956

H. C. Baker, Esq.  
Colonial Office, London

Dear Baker,

We have recently been visited by representatives of a community of Mennonites living in the state of Chihuahua, Mexico, with a view to their establishing a settlement in British Honduras. One hundred to two hundred families have been mentioned. It appears that many of the Mennonites left Canada in 1922, where they were first settled in 1874, because of their non-combatant principle and their refusal to teach in English schools. They have now run into difficulties in Mexico, principally over the need to acquire more land, and are considering the possibilities of settlement in British Honduras.

The proposal holds obvious attractions for us in that it fits well into our plans to develop the hitherto practically untouched agricultural potential of the Colony, because we are led to understand that the Mennonites, while living very much on their own, are competent and industrious agriculturalists.

However, we would need to be satisfied that they were in other respects a community to be encouraged, and I am writing to the Embassy in Mexico City and the High Commissioner's office in Ottawa to find out more about them. The purpose of this letter is to let you know what is afoot and to enquire whether you can give us any information or guidance which would assist us in considering the matter.

The representatives who visited us asked a number of questions which I attach in a separate list. These will give an idea of the way in which they are thinking (i.e., towards the establishment of a "closed community") and it may be that the Colonial Office would wish to give guidance as to the replies which should be sent to them.

The only questions which appear to offer any difficulty are those relating to the teaching of English and to military service.

As to the teaching of English, our legislation does not appear to require that English be either taught or the medium of instruction. However, grants to primary schools are conditional on these things being done. I imagine this would not concern the Mennonites and there seems to be no legal bar at present to their conducting their education in whatever language they choose. There are obvious advantages to basing the education system on a single language. In the case of the Mennonites it may be a good thing to make an exception. How far it is possible to guarantee them this, so long as the community is in the Colony, is difficult to say.

As to military service, I see no great difficulty over this. There is no compulsory military service here (nor was there during the war) so again the question is not an immediate one. If there were, however, presumably we would follow UK practice and exempt conscientious objectors. I believe this is done for the Quakers as a body. Would the Mennonites qualify for group exemption in the United Kingdom?

Yours sincerely,  
Robert M. Major  
Development Commissioner

**Questions asked by representatives of a Community of Mennonites living in Chihuahua, Mexico**

1. Would they be allowed to build their own churches and conduct their services in their own language?
2. Would they be allowed to build and run their own schools with all teaching in their own language (High German)?
3. Would they be permitted not to take the standard oath, e.g., in lower courts (they would, I think, be quite happy to affirm)?
4. Would they have freedom from military service in war and in peace “for us, our children, and our children’s children”?
5. Would marriages in their churches be recognized as legal?
6. If after coming to British Honduras they decided to leave would they have the right to take out all their movable property?
7. Would they be allowed to run their own provident fund for orphans and old people?

\* \* \*

British Vice Consulate  
Chihuahua, Chih., Mexico

September 11th 1956

R. G. Osborn, Esq.  
British Vice Consul  
British Embassy  
Mexico

Mennonite Migration to British Honduras

Dear Osborn,

Upon receiving your letter on the above subject together with copy of the British Honduras Development Commissioner’s letter addressed to Mr. Morgan I have sent for two or three of the leaders of the proposed migration to come to Chihuahua to talk over their tentative plans. They have not yet arrived, but after I have talked with them I will be able to send you a further report.

The Mennonite invasion of this State started in 1922–23. The leaders of the original group of migrants left Canada because the Provincial governments would not continue with the Dominion government’s allowing the Mennonites to dispense with education or their children. Most of the Mennonite communities in Canada did accept State education – to the enormous advantage, of course, of the present generation as is now recognized by most of the unlettered Mennonites in Mexico.

President Obregon of Mexico gave these people freedom in educational and religious matters and exemption from military service. These privileges have always been scrupulously observed by Mexican governments, both Federal and State. But I believe the Ministry of Gobernacion rather feel that such guarantees are now out-of-date and not in keeping with the trend of modern thinking, and it probably will not be long before the Mennonite colonies are forcibly brought to accept normal education. Most of the 25,000

to 30,000 Mennonites in this State were born in Mexico.

For the first many years the Mennonites were about the only producers of small grains, beans, milk, butter and cheese, and eggs in northern Mexico; and they are still the principal producers. They are hard-working and fairly efficient farmers and have been, as all Chihuahua governors recognize, a great economic asset to this State.

Agriculture (with its closely allied industries such as cheese factories and blacksmith shops, etc.) is the only occupation permitted by the Mennonite church. This is why the leaders (the “Eldesters”) oppose general education. The majority of the Mennonites, however, have no wish to engage in anything but agriculture but they feel that education would enable them to do a better job of this. I might mention that the Province of Ontario now permits the Mennonites to run their own schools, but insists on their holding a certain proportion of their classes in English.

The Mennonites are an essentially peaceful people and as far as possible mind their own business. Renegade Mexicans frequently take advantage of their pacificism to rob their homes and their farms, but they are almost always caught and punished by the State if not by the local municipal police. The Mennonites get along well enough with their town and country Mexican neighbours, though, except for the “colonists” recently arrived from Canada; they do not mix with Mexicans in social or marriage affairs.

The bishops and leaders keep a pretty tight control over the general conduct of the Mennonites, and the enforced public confessions and equally public reprimands of miscreants at their weekly church services undoubtedly serve to steer the people along the strait and narrow. The worst crime in the Mennonite book is that of thievery.

The two hundred-odd families (and probably far more than that) which would like to migrate to British Honduras would want to continue their church’s control over their own morals and internal affairs, and they would want to operate their own schools. But in this respect, they should most certainly be forced to conduct as much as possible of the schooling in English, and be encouraged little by little to broaden their educational interests.

Additional farming land for their increasing numbers is growing scarce in Mexico; and good land is getting very expensive in Canada. This is one reason why many of the Mennonites would like to move to British Honduras. But their principal reason for selecting the Colony is their anxiety to get back under the British flag. They seldom run afoul of the law, or even of minor regulations, but they frequently run afoul of grafting officials, and they want to live in a country where justice is the rule and not the rather rare exception.

With the untouched fertile lands available in British Honduras, and the Colony’s need for greater production of foodstuffs, a fair-sized Mennonite colony would certainly be a very great asset. They would soon fill or come close to filling the Colony’s requirements of dairy products and small grains, etc., etc. They would probably want to branch out into lumbering – if this were indicated and permissible – and into cultivating tropical crops



MAIP: MENNONITE ARCHIVES OF ONTARIO (MAOI), XY-19-3-2010-14-56

Old Colony Mennonite schoolchildren from the community of Blue Creek, British Honduras (Belize), walking to school in 1961.

and fruits with which they are not yet acquainted.

If as many as two hundred families should migrate to British Honduras to start with I rather think one of the leaders or bishops would accompany them, but I will know more about this after I have talked with them.

When the time comes to think about such things the best way to move a large group to Belize might perhaps be to make arrangements with the Henderson Line for one of their bi-monthly freighters to carry them from Vera Cruz as deck passengers.

Yours sincerely,  
John Pope  
British Vice Consul

\* \* \*

Office of the High Commissioner for the United Kingdom  
Earnscliffe, Ottawa

20th September, 1956

Robert M. Major, Esq.  
Development Commissioner  
Colonial Secretary's Office  
Belize, British Honduras

Dear Major,

Thank you for your letter of 31st August about the Mennonites in Mexico who wish to settle in British Honduras.

I have consulted the Department of Citizenship & Immigration here and enclose some material about the Mennonites in Canada

with which they have provided me.

The review of the recent book by E. K. Francis, *In Search of Utopia: The Mennonites in Manitoba*, which was published in *Citizen* (an official publication of the Department of Citizenship & Immigration) in June 1956, gives quite a useful account of the Mennonite community in Manitoba from which the group in Mexico broke away in the 1920s. If you would like me to purchase a copy of the book itself, which is available at the Manitoba Historical Society in Winnipeg, would you please let me know?

As you will see from the material enclosed, there are a number of different sects of Mennonites in Manitoba, some of which are more extreme in their opinions than others. A certain number of Mennonites have become merged with the general population but the great majority still live in more or less self-contained communities preserving many of their old customs and ways of life.

Most of the Manitoba Mennonites came from Russia in the 1870s. The Canadian authorities granted them exemption from military service and, apart from freedom to practice their own religion, they were also allowed to run their own schools, etc., in their own way. There are still many Mennonite schools in Manitoba but with the passing of time they have gradually had to accept the introduction of the Provincial school system including the use of the English language in teaching. The majority of the Mennonites now mix with other Canadians in schools and in other activities, but opposition to the Provincial school system and to the penetration of their own community by other modern ideas and a general fear of "secularization" led in the 1920s and again in 1948 to the exodus to Mexico and Paraguay of some of the more orthodox elements who wanted to continue living in more or less complete isolation from their neighbours. In spite of these difficulties I understand that there has at no time been

any actual conflict, let alone violence, between the Mennonites in Canada and the authorities. In general, they are most honest and law-abiding people, deeply religious and good farmers.

It seems likely, however, that the Mexican group which has now approached you for permission to settle in British Honduras may be composed of the more conservative and orthodox type of Mennonites, and before deciding to admit them it would be as well for the British Honduras Government to make quite clear to them what facilities or exemptions from normal administrative arrangements they are or are not prepared to grant.

I am sending a copy of your letter and of this reply (without enclosures) to the United Kingdom Trade Commissioner in Winnipeg. If he has anything to add to the above, I will let you know.

Yours sincerely,  
George Crombie

\* \* \*

British Vice Consulate  
Chihuahua, Chih.

October 11th, 1956

R. G. Osborn, Esq.  
British Vice Consul  
British Embassy  
Mexico

re British Honduras and Mennonites.

Dear Osborn,

Since writing to you a month ago on this subject I have talked with more of the Mennonites who wish to emigrate to British Honduras.

After their autumn crops have been harvested about a dozen more plan on taking a look at the country for themselves, and probably the same Peter Wiebe who went before will accompany them.

The “presiding” bishop, eighty-year-old Isaac Dyck, of Camp 16, does not approve of the move at all, but he is apparently not offering any active opposition to those who want to go.

Bishop Frank Dyck of the Santa Elena colony, a more modern-thinking leader of the sect, is all for it, and says he will go too.

As I believe Peter Wiebe told Mr. E. Caffery, Director of Information and Communications, in Belize, the two or three hundred families most keen on emigrating would need at least fifty thousand acres of land, mostly tillable but part grazing land. The section of country they seem to like most is around El Cayo, some seventy miles west of Belize. The land would not have to be all in one place. It could just as well consist of two or three separated areas.

Regarding my suggestion that the Mennonites be obliged to



A home built by Mennonite settlers in British Honduras.

give instruction in English in their church schools, there seems to be rather violent opposition to this idea among the leaders, and consequently most of the people, while personally favouring a more liberal education, would not dare to antagonize the bishops in this respect. So unless they were entirely free to carry on their own education (or lack of it) in the Colony, only about a dozen families would emigrate.

The only schooling which the Mennonite church schools give here in Mexico is, for boys, from the age of six to thirteen, and, for girls, from six to twelve. The Mennonites in Canada and the United States of course adhere to the laws on education and do so willingly.

The whole deal hinges on whether or not the Government of British Honduras wish to grant these people the religious, military, and educational freedoms they asked for. If so, some two hundred to three hundred families would want to emigrate before next spring or summer, with probably an even larger contingent wanting to go a year or two later. And they would have the full moral and financial support of the Mennonite church – except for the disapproval of Bishop Isaac Dyck and a few other old-timers. Without these “freedoms” only about a dozen would dare to emigrate.

I hope the Government of British Honduras may be able to give the Embassy an idea of their feelings in this respect before the next batch of Mennonite scouts are ready to visit the Colony.

Yours sincerely,  
John Pope  
British Vice Consul

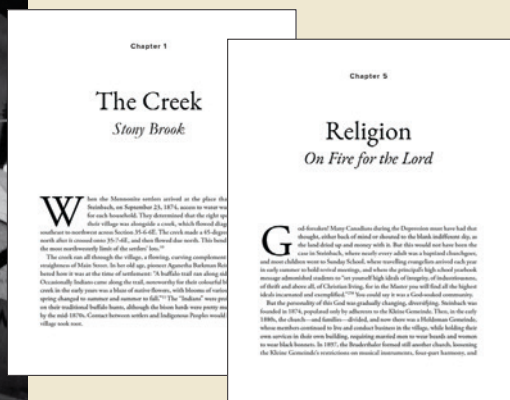
<sup>1</sup> Proposed establishment of a Mennonite settlement in British Honduras, Colonial Office and Commonwealth Office: West Indian Department: Registered Files (WIS Series), CO 1031/1959, The National Archives of the UK, Kew.



# Interested in telling the Mennonite story?



The Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society received a grant to publish Ralph Friesen's book exploring the 1930s in Steinbach.



The Kroeger Clock Heritage Foundation received a grant for the exhibit Keeping Time: The Art and Heritage of Mennonite Clocks, held at the Manitoba Museum.

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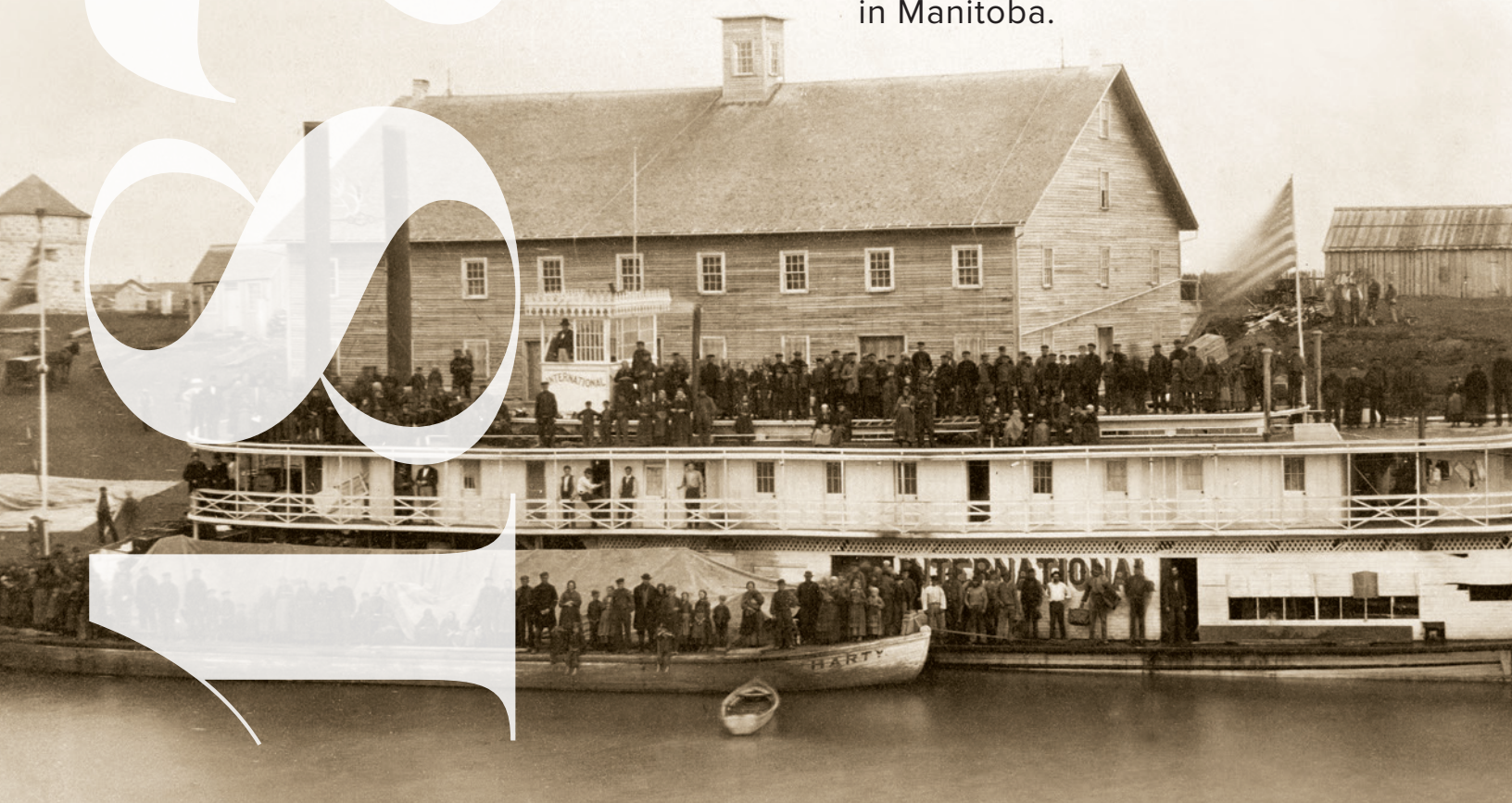


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